The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Funding the arts: who decides? *by Samuel Lipman,* 1

The end of the museum? *by Nelson Goodman,* 9

My pact with Isak Dinesen *by Thorkild Bjørnvig introduction by William Jay Smith,* 15

The poetry of L. E. Sissman *by Brad Leithauser,* 36

Architecture: Aedicular modern: the architecture of Michael Graves *by William H. Jordy,* 43; **Theater:** In search of the good Shepard *by Mimi Kramer,* 51; **Art:** The return of the nativist *by Hilton Kramer,* 58

Books: *Eric Wolf* Europe and the people without history *reviewed by David Gress,* 64; *Jacques Barzun* A stroll with William James *reviewed by Roger Kimball,* 70; *Denis Dutton, editor* The forger's art *reviewed by E. V. Thaw,* 74; **Fiction chronicle** *by Erich Eichman,* 82; **Notebook:** Annals of the Polish avant-garde *by Ewa Kuryluk,* 85

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Funding the arts: who decides?

by Samuel Lipman

The burning question in the cultural world today is not the creation of art, but its funding. In Washington, the Reagan administration's halfhearted attempts to bring the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts into line have been opposed by a solid phalanx of advocates passionately convinced that more money means more beauty. The very health of our national soul, we are told, is a simple function of just how generously the federal government supports cultural activity.

Among the several states, the scurrying for the arts dollar goes on as well. Oregon now has a simple checkoff provision on its income tax returns, painless in its execution, which has been welcomed by Joan Mondale —America's erstwhile "Joan of Art"—as a milestone in paying for culture. Massachusetts prides itself on an arts lottery, in which purchasers of inexpensive tickets can pursue fortune and the sustenance of art at one and the same time. State legislatures are almost everywhere appropriating more money for the arts, and cities too are increasing their own commitments to art.

Public appropriations for the arts, whether from cities, states, or the federal government, are of course fairly new in the United States. The backbone of cultural support now as before is the private patron, a category which has for many years included charitable foundations and which has now been widened to include corporations eager to improve their own images. The White House, eager to repair the damage caused by its widely advertised NEA budget cuts, has laid much stress on the role of private contributions, and has marshalled the prestige of the Presidency on behalf of increased non-governmental backing of the arts.

For many years it has been clear that a major factor encouraging our undoubtedly high level of private patronage in culture has been the preferential treatment accorded charitable contributions as a whole by our tax laws. Every sophisticated fundraising appeal for a worthy cause, whether that cause is religious, educational, medical, social, or cultural, emphasizes without let that a contribution is "tax-deductible to the full extent permitted by law." That extent, under a system of progressive marginal tax rates, is sizable, and increases in rough but direct proportion to the income of the individual making the gift. There are other tax breaks, too. Localities, for instance, are often generous with property-tax exemptions for charitably funded institutions, thus enabling them to enjoy the advantages of real-estate ownership without having to pay the accompanying public costs.

So attractive has this use of tax incentives seemed, and so successful has it been in raising money, that the advocates of philanthropy, with the powerful participation of arts advocates, have turned their attention to increasing the possible use of these measures, making them easier, more widespread, and above all more profitable to the individ-

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uals or businesses making the gift. Indeed, such improvements in the system are a particular task of two Reagan initiatives, the Presidential Task Force on the Arts and Humanities and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Until recently, this peculiarly American practice of private arts support encouraged by tax preferences was a widely accepted national achievement. But now the entire system has come under attack at its most vulnerable point, that of the charitable deduction itself. In a study sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, Alan L. Feld, Michael O'Hare, and J. Mark Davidson Schuster have written a detailed analysis of present tax policy and the arts.[1] Their verdict is clear: present practices are undemocratic, inefficient, corrupt, and damaging to the very arts whose cause they purport to advance.

It would be tempting to attack this study by pointing to the authors' evident lack of feeling for art and culture. Indeed, Messrs. Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster were not chosen for their aesthetic sensibilities; the report's foreword (written by M. J. Rossant, the director of the Twentieth Century Fund) states proudly:

> Their range of knowledge—in public policy, taxation, and not-for-profit institutions—seemed suited to an investigation of indirect subsidies and the implications of changes in the tax laws on institutions and artists who were the recipients of subsidies.

To reject this report merely because of its insensitivity to art, however, would be to miss not only its main thrust but its very *raison d'être*. *Patrons Despite Themselves* is in fact a peculiar blend of populism and statism. And its political implications are no less dangerous for being presented in a tone of injured intellectual virtue.

Throwing scholarly caution to the winds, the authors begin their study with these words:

> The present study originated a decade ago in a chance remark by a trustee of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to Michael O'Hare (during his employment as a planning consultant to the museum): ". . . but, Mr. O'Hare, if you do all those things, they'll all just come here in droves and be all over the place!" This attitude toward the public was not universal among the museum staff or trustees, but it is certainly not an unknown opinion for someone in that environment to hold. How is this possible in a public institution heavily subsidized by government aid?

A rather more clearly worked out statement of this attitude is presented two pages later:

> We are enthusiastic advocates for the arts. We think the government should play a significant role in funding culture, and we think more people should enjoy more and better presentations of the fine arts. But we are democrats before we are art enthusiasts . . . . We think much of the failure in expanding the arts audience in the past decade has resulted from ambivalent commitment to this goal on the part of arts institutions (partly due to the funding structure we describe in this book).

With the requisite ideological superstructure in place, the authors set about demonstrating the facts they deem essential to making their case. In the first chapter they present a representative museum budget, first organized along conventional lines and then organized in a way they feel better expresses the reality of government aid. The conventional budget credits to public sources only those subsidies directly paid out by government agencies. The revised budget counts taxes forgone by government as a direct subsidy. The difference between the two budgets is striking. In the conventional budget, public funds constitute a mere 9.16 percent of income; in the revised budget, public funds account for 30.65 percent.

1 *Patrons Despite Themselves: Taxpayers and Arts Policy.* A Twentieth Century Fund Report. New York University Press, 263 pages.

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Here—in what the authors call "indirect aid"—lies the heart of the matter. What appears in the revised museum budget, they generalize to all of cultural support, and indeed to philanthropic enterprises in general. Tax forgiveness, in the form of relief from income, estate, gift, or property taxes, makes up between two and three times more aid than direct programs. This tax forgiveness, for Messrs. Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster, is a tax expenditure, a term used by Harvard Law School professor Stanley Surrey to describe revenues which would be collectible by government were it not for tax exclusions, credits, and deductions. The thesis of this book is that tax expenditures in the field of culture are flawed for two reasons: they allow these so-called government funds to be directed by private citizens, and they allow the wealthy a greater share of this direction, because progressive tax rates guarantee that the charitable deduction will be more valuable to the rich than to the poor.

After a qualified rejection of the idea that the present tax policy is unfair to artists, the authors go on to discuss "indirect aid" to institutions in detail. Their discussion is limited by their inability to cite data more recent than the mid 1970s. In 1973, for example, the total estimated tax expenditures for the arts amounted to $458 million, of which the federal component made up 75 percent, the states' 3 percent, and the localities' (via property-tax exemptions) 22 percent. Of the total indirect contribution from federal and state government, slightly more than four-fifths resulted from corporate and individual charitable deductions on income tax and from the foregoing of capital gains taxes on gifts of appreciated property. Another 7 percent was the result of gifts made through private foundations (funded with contributions subject to the charitable deduction). The remaining 13 percent came directly through charitable deductions on estate and gift tax returns.

It is clear to the authors that while the arts do benefit from tax incentives, they also benefit because the wealthy, who generate the largest tax expenditure per dollar of their contributions (because of progressive tax rates), are more heavily represented in the support of culture than in any other philanthropic area. The figures are impressive. The authors show that individuals with yearly incomes over $50,000, while giving 4 percent of the gifts to religion, 31 percent to non-health social welfare, 33 percent to health, 60 percent to education, contributed no less than 77 percent of the total charitable gifts to culture.

Given the philanthropic preferences of the wealthy—and progressive tax rates—it is hardly surprising that the lion's share of tax expenditures go to culture. Of the total federal funding going to religion as a result of private giving, only 11 percent was the result of contributions from individuals with yearly incomes over $50,000; for non-health social welfare the figure rose to 50 percent, for health it was 60 percent, for education 76 percent, and for culture a whopping 84 percent.

Not only do those with money support culture disproportionately and control unequally the direction of tax-expenditure funds. They also enjoy a lopsided share of the benefits created by the institutions their dollars support. According to the authors, statistics for 1974-75 show that though individuals with an adjusted gross income of more than $30,000 annually made up no more than 8 percent of the population, they were responsible for 18 percent of visits to museums, theater, classical music concerts and opera, and dance. The well-to-do thus encountered art more often than the less affluent: whereas the average number of visits to artistic events for all income brackets was 4.46, for those earning more than $30,000, it was 10.44, or well over twice as many.

Nonetheless, the authors do conclude that there is some redistributive effect in the support of art by the wealthy, that it is not a matter of "all of society [paying] to support an entertainment for the rich." Indeed, their statistics show that benefits from arts support are greater than payments for every income group below the highest. But they

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draw cold comfort from this modest fact of democratic life. Dourly, they explain that:

> subsidies to the arts, including those financed through the tax system, flow from the very wealthy to the moderately wealthy and the well-educated. Notwithstanding the stated goals of government support, such as, for example, through the National Endowment for the Arts, poor and moderate-income people apparently do not benefit much.

Messrs. Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster are aware that a widely appreciated virtue of our present system of arts support via tax incentives is that it encourages diffusion of decision making. But they do not find a mere criterion of numbers sufficient. Decision-makers, they argue, should reflect expertise in their spending of public money; there should be diversity of opinion; there should be no exercise of "narrow partisan politics or self-serving interests." The authors don't discuss party politics, but they do find the status quo lacking on every other count.

For our authors, the wealthy—despite their relatively better education—have little to recommend them save their money. They cite no recent patron with an artistic sensibility except when his actions can be presented, as in the rumored case of Arthur Sackler (and the Fogg Museum at Harvard), in an unfavorable light. Instead, the patron is presented as a buffoon:

> Cornelius Starr, a New York insurance executive, commissioned a new production of *Madame Butterfly,* citing his impatience with the old production's unforgivable anachronism: cherry blossoms (a spring flower) and chrysanthemums (an autumn flower) side by side on the stage. (The Met does turn down some gifts: the bequest of McNair Ilgenfritz, a Metropolitan Opera box-holder and amateur composer, which was to be used to produce one of his own one-act operas, was refused.)

As it goes with the expertise of patrons, so it goes with meaningful diversity. For the authors, "board-level decision-making within cultural institutions usually rests in the hands of the socially prominent wealthy." According to several surveys cited, these worthies are overwhelmingly white, mostly male, usually at least sixty years old, frequently Episcopalian, often businessmen and lawyers, and even, 7 percent of them, bankers. The conclusion is simple:

> In most cases, trustees of arts institutions resemble donors more closely than the general public; the trustees' allocation of tax expenditure funds thus is likely to be closer to donor's preferences than those of the general public. The problem is not that the allocation decisions necessarily are bad, but that diversity is more likely to suffer than would be the case if the trustees were more representative of the public at large.

Perhaps the gravest allegation made by this report against the present system is that it harms the arts in two ways: it distorts the artistic outcome by encouraging institutions to do certain things rather than others, and it involves administrators in professional and ethical compromises brought about by donor pressures. The first kind of compromise—letting standards sag in order to cater to patrons' whims—is an inevitable result of having patrons at all:

> Arts administrators often modify their programs in the presence or absence of financial support. Generally, any input or output distortion will affect arts administrators' plans and may leave them with a sense of having made a professional compromise.

Messrs. Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster are indeed quick to admit that government aid might be thought to be just as flawed as private support. But they are equally quick in finding a saving grace for the flaw:

> Presumably, if direct [i.e., government aid in lieu of the indirect tax expenditure] aid programs were well formulated and efficiently administered, changes in the operation of arts institutions would be applauded as working in

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> the public interest even though arts professionals might have been forced to change their plans, "lower" their standards, or aim toward a different audience.

However complex a matter professional compromise might be, ethical compromise is just plain cheating. Here the authors cite numerous examples of possible tax dodges, with the plain implication that these frauds are frequent and practiced on a large scale. In principle, such illegalities involve the collusive over-valuation of donations, resulting in larger tax savings to the donor which then turn up as tax-expenditure aid to the institution. The authors' verdict on the whole process is severe:

> The tradition of public philanthropy disguised in private garments has produced a generation of art museum professionals so conditioned to play the role of courtiers and toadies in their relationships with wealthy donors that they apparently have lost hope for any other possibility.

The authors' case against the present organization of private philanthropy is more than a matter of allegations of unfairness and sometimes illegality. Even in the intended operation of the tax laws, the authors find deleterious consequences for art. The particular offenders here are the property-tax exemption and the generous treatment given to gifts of appreciated art works. The property-tax exemption encourages the flow of charitable funds into grandiose building projects; these projects would not have been undertaken, so the authors believe, had their economic cost been calculated without the benefit of tax forgiveness. And had the appreciation of art works been taxable to the donor as a capital gain, there might not be the present tendency on the part of museums to possess vastly more works of art than they can possibly display.

Thus the authors attack museums simultaneously for overbuilding and for having too much art. When one wishes to know from this report just what kind of ideal museum the authors have in mind, the answer is in fact available; they seem to admire institutions which have

> elected instead to acquire a small collection nearly all on display, or no collection at all, with extensive, temporary exhibitions, a lecture program, slide tapes, art classes, and field trips. Similarly, a museum might mount a special exhibition that depended on a few borrowed works and others from its own collection combined with an extensive catalog or lecture program, or it might borrow dozens of objects from around the world for a blockbuster exhibition.

The report ends with suggestions for improving the efficiency and equity of the system. The first suggestion is for improved data collection, through tax returns, by the Internal Revenue Service. Here the authors display a telling faith in the virtue of such governmental initiatives:

> Historically, the Internal Revenue Service has resisted collecting information other than that required to administer the tax code. We believe it should view its mission more broadly and include among its responsibilities reporting to the public not only where tax monies come from but also how efficiently the tax system as a whole is working.

As alternatives to the present charitable deduction, they suggest various matching grant proposals, which would have the effect of restricting the amount of tax savings to donors. Because it would apply to all charitable contributions, one proposal involving a flat tax credit would seriously cut (by 20 percent) contributions to both educational and cultural institutions. Another proposal, establishing a government contribution to each charity based on private contributions, would avoid the problem of decreasing cultural funds; it would also avoid "the problem of the charitable institution perceiving the public contribution as private." A third proposal would have the government allocate an amount to the donor's preferred

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charities based on the percentage the donor's income given to charity each year. The author's preference lies with a flat tax credit of approximately 30 percent. Any shortfall to the arts could be made up, they feel, by direct government aid. They also feel that the amount of such aid would have to be determined through increased and more responsive record-keeping and data collection.

It should be clear by now that the ever-prevailing bias of the authors is away from the private sector and toward government. Their opinion of direct governmental aid is indeed high:

> As regards the direct system, several points should be noted in its favor. The government authority empowered to distribute funds, even in the simplest description of the direct aid system, should not be viewed as a usurper of rights that legitimately reside with the governed. A more appropriate view is of a willing exchange by the decisionmakers of their individual responsibility for the greater efficiency and expertise found in a centralized agency.
>
> Evidence of such a voluntary exchange also is found outside government in the existence of United Funds and, say, the March of Dimes. (In fact, some communities are now witnessing the birth of United Arts Funds.) Individuals, of course, give their money directly to hospitals and laboratories, but most elect to make their contributions more effective by delegating to a centralized bureaucracy power to make the allocation . . . . The establishment and funding of government charitable agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts operate similarly.

The praise that follows makes quite plain just what specific direction arts funding should take:

> . . . the National Endowment for the Arts displays considerable diversity as well as insulation against political influence—in addition to the expertise we should expect to find in a centralized agency. The basic statute that established the NEA, as well as the agency's internal policy, provides for varying levels of expert decisionmaking. For example, there is no "arts czar" within the NEA: no one person can veto a particular project or reject a specific artist. Applications to the NEA go through a variety of review stages, the most important of which is the advisory panel review. NEA grants most often go indirectly to arts institutions and arts projects through state arts councils or arts service organizations. The NEA imposes no guidelines on substance. Thus, diversity is protected both geographically and by the wide range of people and projects receiving money.

The sole reference cited by the authors for this extraordinary collection of misinformation on and misevaluation of the NEA is Michael Straight's trivial account of his days as number two man at the agency during the Nixon and Ford administrations. But in fact the NEA during the Carter years (the period immediately preceding the authors' project) was deeply susceptible to a wide range of political influences and even control, exercised not just by Vice President Mondale's wife but also by Chairman Livingston Biddle (a close associate and protégé of Democratic Senator Claiborne Pell), Deputy Chairman Mary Ann Tighe, who came to her job directly from the Vice President's staff, and assorted ethnic and interest groups in Congress. Despite relatively superficial circulation among staff and panels, there has been a steady revolving-door relationship between the NEA and the arts advocacy organizations. Panels have historically shown the same key names popping up again and again. Not only does major power at the NEA reside with the staff rather than with the panels, who only see applications after they have been winnowed through staff-inspired guidelines and staff review; staff recommendations are virtually the only factor in determining who is asked to serve on panels. There is an "arts czar" at the NEA. He is called the Chairman, and he chooses his staff as well as having final power of veto on grants. He also has the power to make grants in his own name and on his own authority. NEA grants do not go most

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often indirectly to institutions and projects through state arts councils and service organizations; the majority of them, both in number and in dollar value, go *directly* to institutions and individuals.

Few observers of art would credit the NEA with having had other than a marginal effect on the development of American culture during the nearly two decades of its existence. In music, for example, America's best years were in the period from the mid-Thirties to the mid-Fifties, well before the NEA's founding. The same would seem to hold true for literature, and for the visual arts as well. The NEA has poured large sums into performance and exhibition; this largesse has seemed to have had little effect on artistic creation itself. If the changes advocated by the authors of this report were to be put into law, there is no doubt that the vastly increased amount of government funding required to take up the slack would be administered by the NEA. There is no reason to think this added burden would be either fruitfully or efficiently borne.

It hardly seems fair to expect Messrs. Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster, who care so little about art, to know very much more about the NEA. But the issue is not whether they know either about art or about the NEA. The issue here is their ideological commitment to government as something to be preferred to the world of private individuals. In this connection, the authors go beyond a mere critique of the power of wealth and seem—at least by indirection—to be attacking all non-expert opinion. Thus, they quote Monroe Price, writing in the *Hastings Law Journal*:

> The present condition is that museums characteristically represent a context in which a public trust, largely publicly supported, is vested in individuals over whom the public has virtually no control. Wealth and status, independent of other characteristics, can find their place. While there is nothing wrong with those characteristics, it is wrong to have a system of museums dependent on wealth . . . . By relying on tax induced contributions, we place the center of strength for our arts institutions with the rich. It is their taste that becomes the museum's taste, and thence the community's. As a nation we have always depended on the bounty of the rich and the powerful to build our cultural institutions, but in this century we have rewarded such gifts with generous tax savings. Perhaps it is time that we review our method of building public collections to determine whether more democratic means would yield institutions that are freer of idiosyncratic and individual taste.

Significantly, the argument immediately passes on to another subject.

The authors thus appear to the reader as veritable worshippers of Big Brother. Whether that powerful creature wears the mask of the IRS or of the NEA seems less important to them than that he wears the cloak of the democratic communality. Not only have voters—as shown by the election of Ronald Reagan—rejected this vision of the proper organization of society, increasing numbers of intellectuals too (including many of the authors' social scientist colleagues) are coming to the conclusion that the genius of America is not housed in the Capitol in Washington.

To speak against the role of government in culture or in any other of our philanthropic pursuits, though it is unavoidably to advocate the participation of those who are best able to contribute, is not to bless everything the private sector or its members do. Of course patrons are often foolish; of course they are often willful and capricious; of course they are often ignorant. They too are sometimes venal, and a few are even criminal. The chief justification for a private system of cultural patronage—and for the use of tax provisions to direct "government" funds to the objects of private choice—is not just that it has worked well for our artistic life. It is not even that many nonliberals properly object to the whole tax-expenditure argument because it seems to presume that all the fruits of society belong to the state. Vastly more significant is that our reliance on the private sector, in all its richness, its

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power, and even its arrogance, is a manifestation of liberty. Because of the *private* patrons' power, this liberty extends even to the rights of artists to resist, criticize, and even replace supporters as the artists themselves see fit.

All these tributes to the private patron hardly mean that patronage cannot be improved. Arts supporters are greatly responsible for the intrusion of government into the funding of culture. The demand for government aid has not come from the private sector because of any real unwillingness on the part of patrons to contribute; rather it has resulted from a loss of willingness by the private sector to take responsibility for its own taste and its own decisions. The result of this loss of nerve has been a desire for government endorsement of private actions. Here is the origin of the need for the famous "governmental good housekeeping seal of approval" so often mentioned by high corporate executives. Here is the reason for the vast success of NEA Challenge Grant programs in raising several private dollars for every one offered by the government as bait.

This loss of confidence by the private sector can be broken down into two parts. The first is a widespread loss of willingness to rely on individual intellectual and artistic judgment. There is, unfortunately, a solid basis for this feeling of weakness: the rich, no less than every other economic group in American society, have been the victims of a slack and meretricious educational system. As a result the knowledge necessary to make intelligent decisions in culture is all too often lacking. The cure for this state of affairs is hardly an increased role for government in making up peoples' minds; it is better and more serious education, in the arts and in every other area, not just for the rich, but for all Americans.

The second part of this pervasive loss of confidence by the private sector is a consequence of the powerful virus of the welfare state and its notion that only government, not the individual, can take responsibility for human life. Private wealth has, at least until recently, seemed a dubious possession, a relic of the primitive individualism of a bygone era. Foremost among the believers in this socialist doctrine, oddly enough, have been those Americans rich enough and well-educated enough to form and execute decisions in cultural philanthropy. The rich too have believed that socialism is coming; what better way to accommodate the inevitable than to take shelter in the shadow of government?

A further comment must be made. Many will find it curious indeed that the authors of this report, with the backing of the prestigious Twentieth Century Fund, have taken the trouble to attack the entire charitable deduction, extending as it does across the enormous fields of religion, education, social welfare, and health, merely for the purpose of adjusting perceived inequities in cultural funding. Though culture accounts for only 2 percent of charitable contributions, it is plain that the real destination of this report's attack is not just cultural funding but rather the dependence of the entire philanthropic sector of American life on private funding and private decisionmaking. Culture and education, health and social welfare, are now the recipients of the largesse of affluent Americans; as our prosperity increases, religion too will increasingly be supported by those groups able to take advantage of the present charitable deduction. Plainly there is now common cause, in attacking the idea that decisions are best made by the government, to be made by groups ranging from the richest lovers of Beethoven quartets to the poorest worshippers in small churches. What is at stake is nothing less than the preservation of our historical diversity against the artificial diversity provided by governments capable only of programmed and imposed representation.

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The end of the museum?

by Nelson Goodman

The first impression one gets from some museums and some writing about museums is that a museum functions much like such other institutions as a house of detention, a house of rehabilitation, or a house of pleasure; or, in the vernacular, a jailhouse, a madhouse, or—a teahouse.

These comparisons are not altogether facetious. A museum may maintain an elaborate intelligence network to capture the wanted, and a security system to prevent their escape or to protect vulnerable inmates. And by overwhelming popular opinion supported by a distressing number of official statements, a primary function of the museum is to provide the opportunity for a few moments of inconsequent pleasure.

Sometimes, again, the behavior and reports of a museum suggest rather that it is like a professional ball park, where what counts is how many people go through the gates. On the other hand, is it perhaps possible that a museum may be more like a hospital, where what matters is not how many patients enter, but what happens to them while they are there?

Or is a museum better compared to a library? A few years ago an old friend of mine, Professor Hans Trublemacher, visited Mars on the request of the Martians themselves, to evaluate their libraries. I quote from one of his letters to me:

> Until twenty years ago, the Martians had no libraries. They sent a committee to Earth to survey our libraries here and to set up a like system on their return. But something seems to have gone awry.
>
> In a typical Martian library, there are no tables, desks, or cubicles, and seldom any chairs except for the guards. There are no open shelves, and no books circulate. In each reading room, certain of the most important books are set out on separate pedestals, against the wall and behind a rail that keeps readers about four feet away, pages being turned by remote control. Frequently, groups of children are led through the room while a docent lectures about the books. In the newer libraries several readers had electronic packets strapped on, and I discovered that these were miniature projectors, rented by the libraries, that flashed a sequence of slides just above the text in the reader's visual field. I could not determine whether the purpose was to make sure the reader had the proper images accompanying the text, or to pace his reading, or merely to give him something to occupy his mind while reading.
>
> All in all I found very inspiring the sight of people standing and doggedly reading a book more than an arm's length away, while machines flashed pictures and docents chattered to their charges; but I could not understand why the shop at the entrance was doing a brisk business selling small (and of course unreadable) plaster reproductions of some of the more popular volumes.

Now obviously the Martians, from our

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point of view, had somewhere gotten their antennas crossed. You can't run a library the way they run a library; and you can't run a library the way we run a museum. But the question arises whether you can run a museum the way they run a library—that is, whether you can run a museum the way we run a museum.

After all, a museum is not a jail or a sanatorium or a teahouse or a superdome or a hospital or a library. What can be said for the museum—this cultural curiosity, this institutional monstrosity? Well, some of what *is* said can be found in museums' annual reports and appeals and in speeches by officers of arts councils and foundations and members of legislative and administrative organs of governments. And to most of what is said I cry: Deliver us from our defenders!

What is said often adds up to something like this: that museums provide a relaxed way of filling the spare time that advancing technology has given us; that they exert a humanizing influence against the overintellectual, materialistic tenor of our times; that they reduce juvenile delinquency and, by stressing the spiritual, make for moral betterment of citizens and community; and that museums, by attracting tourists, providing jobs, and stimulating the expanding art market, contribute to prosperity.

The case put more or less in these terms has become so familiar that we often forget how hollow it is. All these arguments, of course, are beside the point, and some are simply false. Museums, like theaters, sometimes do provide pleasure for leisure, but what have exhibitions of Goya's *Disasters of War* or Picasso's *Guernica* to do with pleasure? To contend that museums foster our humanity in the face of current intellectual and scientific fervor suggests that what museums do is not intellectual, and that scientific activity is not human. As for moral uplift, there is equal evidence that museums offer outstanding opportunities for vandalism, and promote cupidity and connivance. The only moral effect a museum has on me is a temptation to rob the place. And while museums do attract tourists and stimulate cash flow, that is done better by gambling casinos.

Of course, such arguments are designed for those who must be convinced: foundations, politicians, chambers of commerce, trustees, and the public. But we need not be misled by the specious challenge to justify museums in terms of what they, on the contrary, help to justify. Shakespeare's plays and Bach's music—and Einstein's theorems, too—can give pleasure, occupy leisure, elevate character, and contribute to the economy; but quite plainly, that is not the point. The pleasure is incidental. The point of having leisure time, of a decent moral climate, of prosperity beyond basic need lies in what these can help make possible. The plays, the music, the mathematical physics, and painting and sculpture do not pose the question "why?"; they answer it.

I am thoroughly convinced of the high importance of the museum's mission. What is that mission? We come closest to it, I think, in the comparison with libraries. Libraries and museums alike collect and preserve works and make them available for public use. Library and museum staffs thus have in their charge enormously powerful agents for transforming ourselves and our environment. Libraries and museums alike are fundamentally educational rather than recreational institutions.

But museums face problems that libraries do not. First, while most users of a library know how to read the books there, many visitors to the museum do not know how to see, or how to see in terms of, the works there; and second, the works in a museum must be viewed under severe and stultifying restraints. Unless the museum, despite its handicaps, finds ways of inculcating the ability to see and of aiding and abetting the exercise of that ability, the other functions of the museum will be pointless and its works as dormant as books in an unreadable language or in locked bindings. The museum has to function as an institution for the prevention and cure of blindness in order to make works work. And making

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works work is the museum's major mission.

That raises further questions. What, more expressly, does it mean for works to work? What are the special obstacles to be surmounted or circumvented? How, despite the obstacles, can works be made to work? And how can you judge the success of your efforts to make them work?

What we see in a museum may profoundly affect what we see when we leave; and this is as true for nonrepresentational as for representational works. As I have put it elsewhere, our worlds are no less powerfully informed by the patterns and feelings of abstract works than by a literal Chardin still-life or an allegorical "Birth of Venus." After we spend an hour or so at one or another exhibition of abstract painting, everything tends to square off into geometric patches or swirl in circles or weave into textural arabesques, to sharpen into black and white or vibrate with new color consonances and dissonances. In turn, what we see when we leave the museum may appreciably affect what we see when we return.

Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, bringing out new connections and contrasts, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organization and reorganization of experience, in the making and remaking of our worlds. If that sounds grandiloquent, I must insist that I am not romanticizing or rhapsodizing here, not talking of ecstasy or rapture or the miraculous or the visionary, but calling attention to down-to-earth facts abundantly attested by observation, by able writers on art, and by psychological experiment. The myths of the innocent eye, the insular intellect, the mindless emotion are obsolete. Sensation and perception and feeling and reason are all facets of cognition, and they affect and are affected by each other. Works work when they inform vision; *inform* not by supplying information but by *forming* or *re*-forming or *trans*forming vision; vision not as confined to ocular perception but as understanding in general.

Clearly, works of science work in this sense, too, and so also do the collections of science museums, historical museums, and botanical and zoological gardens. The differences between the arts and the sciences have been, I think, misunderstood and overstressed; outmoded dichotomies have contrasted them in misleading ways and even engendered antagonisms. Museums of different kinds indeed have some different problems, but their common end is improvement in the comprehension and creation of the worlds we live in.

But a work must not be treated as a mere visual aid for use in seeing what lies beyond it. Equally important is how we see the work itself, and what we see in it, in terms of a world we build partly in terms of the work. Reverberations from a work may travel in cycles through our everyday environment, other works, and itself, again and again, with ever-changing effect. Works work by interacting with all our experience and all our cognitive processes in the continuing advancement of our understanding.

Even the most able work, however, does not always work. Whether it does or not will depend also upon the capacities and condition of the viewer, and the surroundings and circumstances of the viewing. Thus the museum has to contend with some formidable obstacles to fulfilling its mission.

First, what we see in a work and what we take from it depend heavily on what we bring to it: upon relevant experience and skills involved in our looking, upon pertinent visual inquiry. The museum cannot instantly supply the needed experience and competence but must find ways of fostering their acquisition. Audience development is not finished when lines form at the door.

Second, the circumstances for viewing in a museum are at best abnormal and adverse. The viewer cannot handle a work, try it in different lights, put it beside various other works for comparison, take it home, come upon it in a sunbeam reflected from snow, contemplate it in comfort. The floors in a museum will defeat any feet and wrack any

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back; the distance from turnstile to object you want to see is longer than from airport entrance to your flight; the displays are as if congealed in a glass paperweight, the lighting as unvarying as in summer at the Poles, the oases as scarce as in Death Valley, and the atmosphere as bristling with prohibitions as in the Pentagon. Our justifiable concern over the cost and rarity of works and the need to protect them from theft and violence and deterioration have reinforced the inherent tendency of the museum to become a place hostile to the achievement of its own main purpose.

Third, and aggravating the other difficulties, is the timelessness of most works in a museum. Unlike a play or a concert, a painting or sculpture is all there at once. And although a book, too, is all there at once, you start reading on the first page and stop when you reach the last. You can go back if you like, but the difference between going back and going forward is clear. But where do you start and when do you stop looking at a picture? There is no going forward or backward, no beginning and no end. You can take it all in, superficially, at a glance, and the average looking time per viewer per picture viewed must be something under five seconds. Dynamic as a work may be in expression and design, it is physically inert, while the human being is alive and restless. Psychologists have found that what is looked at by the unmoving eye tends to fade out; that change is essential to perception. Somehow, the immutable work and the volatile viewer have to be reconciled. Attention must be held long enough for a work to work.

How can these obstacles be surmounted?

On the problem of helping the viewer, two opposing policies have been advocated. The first is to show a work properly and get out of the way. Keep it free from all encumbrances, all gimmicks, all jabber. Show it well spaced from other works, with minimal labels and nothing else. The extreme example of this is showing a work in a separate and otherwise empty gallery. Running somewhat as follows, the case for such a policy is strong:

> Supplementary material, whether presented by lengthy labels, gallery talks, or cinema sideshows may distract and mislead, may block the insight a viewer could gain from undisturbed study of the work itself. Where nonverbal works are concerned, words are intrusive and nonverbal aids are presumptuous and competitive. In the museum, there should be a direct, unchanneled transaction between viewer and work. One learns to see, not by being told or shown how to look, but by looking. If the viewer will try, and the work is good enough, it will work without help.

The opposite policy is to make available all sorts of help: informative and suggestive labels, pointed juxtapositions in installation, easily accessible photographs and books, live or recorded talks, films, and videotapes in adjacent cubicles, and whatever else may hold and guide attention. The case for this policy is also very strong. Against the director or curator who advocates showing a work in splendid isolation, the argument runs:

> After all, that's not the way you look at a work yourself. You immediately assemble photographs of related works, consult books and articles, see all the comparable works possible (even taking the trouble to visit Europe on a grant), and generally betray your proclaimed principle that all there is in a work can be seen by looking at it apart from all else. If, with your experience and skill, you still need informative and comparative material before you, how can you expect the novice and the amateur to do without it? As for the idea that words are an intrusion where nonverbal works are concerned, we need only remember how comment by a Meyer Schapiro can illuminate Cézanne's *Bather*. But the development of discrimination requires also presentation by example of some of the subtle differences and covert kinships between works. Much of the looking we learn by is comparative looking. What can be found in a work is intimately involved with other works seen, and with other experience. As no man is an island, neither is any work.

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In the face of this conflict between the two policies, what is the museum to do? Seek further arguments for one or the other? Or compromise? Or vacillate? More to the point, what particular means and measures should be adopted, in view of the virtues and vices of each policy—especially in view of the danger that proffered help may distract and that lack of help may leave the looker lost?

For dealing with the artificial and uncomfortable conditions for viewing works, the museum seems to be restricted to such needed but inadequate measures as carpeting, seating, daylight when possible, and demilitarization of the guards. Security and conservation cannot be sacrificed; the viewer cannot have free access to the works or borrow them. What has to be done, therefore, is to find other means of extending the museum's influence beyond the museum building into more natural settings—into homes and working places.

The commonest device—though often thought of more as a source of revenue than as an educational instrument—is the shop or sales desk. The visitor's experience in the museum can to some extent be prolonged and enhanced if he can take away photographs, even postcards, and pertinent books. They serve as reminders of what he has seen. The sale of plaster reproductions is much more controversial. The argument for them is that they are substitutes for the originals, since the amateur cannot tell the difference, and that they are inexpensive enough to be thrown away when he comes to know better. The contrary view holds that the ready disposability of these imitations is their best feature. For how can the person with a daily visual diet at home consisting of imitations that lack most of the important qualities of the original ever come to know better? How can discrimination develop when the significant subtle qualities of the genuine works are missing? We might do better to install the imitations beside the originals, where the differences can be seen.

A less frequent response to the problem is the sales and rental gallery where original works can be found to take home. These are not, indeed, the present masterpieces in the museum's collection; but the visitor fresh from seeing those can here apply his newfound excitement and acuity to choosing a work to live with. Surely I need not dwell on the enormous growth in understanding that can result from so intimate an acquaintanceship, whether the work wears well or wilts. When the visitor to the museum is motivated to rent or buy an original work, the museum is making its own works work beyond its walls. "The museum without walls" in my view embraces not reproductions, but a wider range of genuine works.

The sales and rental gallery, and the sales exhibition, may be resisted on the ground that the museum thus dirties its hands with commerce and opens its doors to works of lesser quality, or at least of less well-recognized quality, than those in its collection. Here, I am afraid the evil side of elitism looms. Insistence on excellence in works for the museum, and refusal of all compromise with popular taste, are all to the good; for the muscles of the mind must stretch to be strengthened. But giving the impression that the only works worthwhile are those so rare and costly as to be confined to museums and great collections, that there are no good works that people can own and live with—this is one of the worst effects a museum can have. And when works begin to be produced expressly for museums, we reach a stage of utter perversity. For the museum after all is an anomalous and awkward institution made necessary only by the rarity and vulnerability of works that belong elsewhere.

The problem presented by the timelessness of works—by their being all there all the time—has to be met by finding ways of lengthening and intensifying inquisitive looking. The value of a gallery talk may often lie less in the imparting of information than in the focusing of attention upon a work. But a more effective means may be to initiate inquiry. I suspect that children may not benefit as much from what a teacher tries to tell them in a gallery as, say, from

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being asked to search the gallery (without looking at labels) for another work by the same artist as an indicated work. The active inquiry that begins then and continues to a conclusion or a conjecture may well have more effect than does passive gazing.

Finally, how can anyone tell whether the policies and practices adopted are accomplishing the purposes of the museum? Lists of acquisitions, accounts of donations, attendance records, columns of publicity, and number of wings the building has sprouted speak only of means. But are the works being made to work?

Unfortunately, there are no crisp and clear tests. There are only signs. As a hospital's success may be gauged by improvement in the physiological and psychological health of its patients and its community, so a museum's success might be judged by the cultural health of its visitors and its community. But cultural health is much less easily judged than organic health. Again there are only signs, signs that we may seek by asking whether people are buying original works, whether commercial galleries are surviving and what they are handling, whether serious artists are becoming recognized by the public. But the answers are not easy to arrive at and the criteria applied are debatable.

Are we, then, left with the disheartening conclusion that we never will be able to tell how well we are doing? Or can we perhaps, if not measure, at least roughly estimate our success as judged by some such criteria? Alas, even that hope may be clouded by a further problem. Consider a well-known experiment carried out a few years ago by industrial engineers exploring ways of increasing production in factories. They spent some days in one department improving the lighting—and production immediately went up. But before they wrote into the books the law that better lighting will increase production, one of them had a second thought. He sent a crew into another department to spend some time conspicuously working on the lights but leaving them in the end exactly as they had been before—and production went up. You can predict the result of a third experiment when the lighting was made a little worse. This is the famous Hawthorne effect, also known as the Pink Pill Phenomenon, or the Doctor's Delight. Within limits, whatever we do will succeed, so long as we do, or appear to do, something. While that may sound comforting, the conclusion that improvement effected constitutes no evidence that we have been making good choices all along is, to say the least, somewhat disconcerting.

Luckily, other resources are available: personal experience and the still meagre and seemingly remote results of basic research. First, those who have been through and are still going through the process of learning how to look at a work—learning what helps and what hinders and under what circumstances illumination results—can offer guidance. Second, theoretical and laboratory research that tells us something of how human beings function in acquiring and exercising skills involved in understanding works can help in choosing means and methods to be tried in the museum. Basic research can supply no fast and full and final answers, but I am convinced that cooperation between research and practice is as much needed in making works work as in making crops grow—even though the harvest is less easily weighed.

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The pact: my friendship with Isak Dinesen

by Thorkild Bjørnvig

Introduction

Like Thorkild Bjørnvig I read *Seven Gothic Tales* by Isak Dinesen when the book was first published to great acclaim in 1934. American readers then knew only that it was the work of a Continental European author writing in English. We learned soon that Isak Dinesen was in reality Baroness Blixen-Finecke of Rungstedlund near Copenhagen. Dinesen was her maiden name; Isak she had chosen because it meant "laughter" in Hebrew. From her own account in *Out of Africa,* published in 1938, we discovered that Karen Blixen was quite as extraordinary as any tale she had told, that she had lived for seventeen years in Kenya, where she had run a coffee farm, hunted lions, walked with Masai warriors, and sat with Arab sheiks. While waiting for the rainy season, she had begun to put down some of the tales that she told to entertain a friend on his return from his safaris. When the bottom dropped out of the coffee market, her farm was sold, and her friend, Denys Finch-Hatton, was killed when his small plane crashed. Having lost everything that was important to her, Karen Blixen returned to Denmark to begin a new life as the writer Isak Dinesen. With the publication of *Winter's Tales* in 1942 and the other books that followed until her death twenty years later, her worldwide reputation continued to grow. All her books were written while she was gravely ill, existing, we were told, largely on a diet of grapes, oysters, and champagne.

When in 1974 the distinguished Danish poet Thorkild Bjørnvig published *The Pact,* the book caused a sensation in Denmark. This record of his intimate four-year association with Karen Blixen in the early 1950s presented a portrait unlike any other. Isak Dinesen had become such a legend that many readers welcomed this opportunity to have the veil pulled back and to see her revealed as she really was. Others were outraged by what they considered a betrayal of the confidence that the old writer had placed in her young protégé. What relevance did all the unseemly personal details that he had unearthed have to do with her work that had long been established to be of enduring value?

I may well be one of the few people in this country who have known both the principal characters in this extraordinary story. I met Thorkild Bjørnvig in 1978 at Norman, Oklahoma, when we both served as judges, along with ten other writers and critics from as many countries, to award the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Thorkild Bjørnvig impressed me at once as a man of great learning, who carried his learning lightly. His hair was completely white but his round, clear face was unlined and his blue eyes bright and sparkling. His dress was casual, and there was a remarkable openness about his nature. His buoyancy and youthful charm had not diminished with age, and he seemed to be enjoying him-

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self immensely. I was struck, as Karen Blixen had been, by his resounding laugh. Like Emanuele in the story "Echoes," whom she modeled on him, "he might laugh for no apparent reason and apparently without being able to stop, like a kind of music box run riot." I got to know Throkild Bjørnvig better when I went to visit him a few months later at Nordby on the island of Samsø, where he lives in a charming house tucked away in the hills on the edge of the sea. I walked with him and his young son along the beach on a path not unlike the one he describes toward the end of *The Pact*. Then, and on on my subsequent visits, we spent hours together putting into English his poem "The Dolphin," a tribute to one of the greatest of living creatures in language that is straightforward and powerful. I began to understand why, since the publication of his first book of poems *Star Behind the Gable* in 1947, Thorkild Bjørnvig has come to be recognized as one of Denmark's foremost poets.

The exchange between the two characters in *The Pact* is like that in a Racinian drama or in the recitative of an opera. At moments of heightened tension there are extended declamations or arias. When the two tire of speaking themselves, they rise to play on the phonograph a song by Schubert or a symphony by Tschaikovsky. For me the dialogue in *The Pact* is all the more affecting because I have heard the two real voices on numerous occasions.

I heard the voice of Tanne, as Karen Blixen was known to her friends, for the first time at its full in 1959 when, in a black evening dress, her eyes dark with kohl, she sat on the stage at the Poetry Center of the YM-YWHA in New York and for an hour told her tales to a packed house, and told them without ever once referring to a page of paper or a book. Elizabeth Kray, who was then in charge of programs at the Center, had asked me to don a dinner jacket (unusual there where dress for readings has always been informal) and to introduce the speaker, whose work she knew I admired. Never before or since have more pains been taken with arrangements. We did not want to burden Baroness Blixen with any sort of rehearsal, but I went for a complete run-through. We checked out the lights, the placement of the Renaissance chair and the small table accompanying it, on which was set a glass of deep-gold vermouth. (Water was thought to be far too banal for such a Scheherazade.) Never had there been such preparations and never had there been such an audience. Her listeners came from every corner of Manhattan and from every walk of life; taxis and limousines converged nonstop on Ninety-second Street: the evening had all the earmarks of the most glamorous Broadway opening. The reception was such that she was called back a second and then a third time to repeat the exact same program.

I had been prepared by her photographs for Karen Blixen's extreme frailty. But I was still shocked to contemplate for the first time her spectral presence: it seemed incredible that the dusky power of her voice and the scintillation of her deep, dark eyes could come from so narrow and delicate a body, a body that had to be moved about like one of the puppets she had so often described. When she came on stage leaning on my arm, I had to raise it higher than I would have ordinarily because I was literally carrying her; she could not walk of her own accord. After the program, when she made her way in a wheelchair through the throng lined up outside the auditorium, almost hidden by the roses in her lap, her slender doll-like head just visible above them seemed itself to grow out of one of the stems, as in an illustration by Grandville or Tenniel. Once, as the roses were lifted from her and she prepared to get into the waiting car, she screamed: one of the thorns, almost a third the size of her wrist, had pierced her flesh and blood oozed out against the red petals.

We had all heard at the time that Karen Blixen had had several operations on her back and that she was often in such severe pain that she had to lie flat on the floor and dictate her stories. What no one in New York then knew was that she was suffering from advanced stages of the syphilis which

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she had contracted from her husband in Africa and which had not been properly treated in time.

When she entered a room, this thin, sepulchral figure, on the arm of Clara Svendsen, her sturdy, round-faced secretary, who had accompanied her to New York (they were Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Karen Blixen liked to say), people would gasp. But during her three-and-a-half-month stay in the United States she kept to a schedule that would have finished off a robust trooper half her age. She traveled to Boston, telling her stories to huge crowds and attending late-night parties. Because she wanted to meet Marilyn Monroe, she went out to lunch with Carson McCullers in Nyack, where she did everything but dance on the marble-top table (Carson McCullers said that she did, but Arthur Miller insisted that she did not). When she told her tales on television, the young son of friends of mine rushed from the room crying, as much with delight as with alarm, "Mommy, come and see the witch!" She ended up near death in the Harkness Pavilion. Once released, she continued her unrelenting pace.

Isak Dinesen's work is concerned with loss—the loss of Africa, the loss of Denys Finch-Hatton, the loss of her health, and the loss of what she considered civilized values in the modern world. She realizes almost as soon as she meets Thorkild Bjørnvig that she will lose him also. And yet she struggles passionately to hang on to him; and, in the end, is left, as in the classical drama, which she evokes, with only her passion. With her heroine Pellegrina Leoni she cries, but in triumph, when she finds the young disciple whose voice will replace hers, "I have got my talons in him. He will not escape me." But he does escape, as she knew he would.

And yet artistically he does not escape: he is there in her story "Echoes" for himself and for the world to see. Isak Dinesen remarked once in an interview that she was fortunate in possessing exceptionally keen senses and that she had never met anyone who could see as well as she could. As Thorkild Bjørnvig testifies, she could spot four-leaf clovers as she strolled along without having to kneel down in the grass. In her art also she is able to view her subject from a distance. She looks back on her life in Africa, her lost farm and her lost love, from a great height and brings them all close up. She looks back on the life of her own family and on the life that had preceded her in Denmark and in Europe; and she looks farther back on classical Greece and beyond. This vision gives her work a dimension almost totally lacking in modern writing. In a sense, hers was no idle boast that she was three thousand years old, a witch who had dined with Socrates.

Part and parcel of this artistic dimension is Isak Dinesen's extreme reticence. The story she gives us in *Out of Africa* is, as art, in every way complete. And yet when we read the wonderful letters that she wrote back from Kenya, we see how much she omitted. We accept her description of Finch-Hatton as a man of heroic proportions. Seen through her loving eyes, he had no failings, no flaws. The break that took place before Finch-Hatton's sudden death, and what led up to it, is not even mentioned. And rightly so, I believe, because it is not artistically germane: she is concerned only with detailing the lineaments and development of her passion and her loss. In *The Pact* Karen Blixen remarks that she felt sometimes when she was together with Bjørnvig that it was like an echo of her time with Denys Finch-Hatton. And in writing of this affair, she is as reticent as she was in *Out of Africa*. The poet is viewed from considerable distance; the young man becomes a mere boy, her tale an echo of an echo.

By putting down in *The Pact* what Isak Dinesen left out, Thorkild Bjørnvig has written more than a personal memoir. The book indeed recalls that classic novel of psychological analysis, *Adolfe,* written in 1807 by Benjamin Constant under circumstances not entirely unlike those at Rungstedlund. Constant, whose life was marked by liaisons with women older than himself, was for seventeen years the largely platonic companion

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of Mme de Staël, one of the leading literary figures of the day, as indomitable as Karen Blixen but far less interesting. Her hold on Constant was such that not even the disclosure of his secret marriage to another woman would permit him to break with her. There was also, as with Bjørnvig and Blixen, a written pact of attachment. In that affair it was Constant who was syphilitic, and the advanced stage of the disease may have accounted for the peculiarity of some of his actions. Bjørnvig had only his youth and his unformed sensibility to blame, and the portrait he draws of himself as a young man is not always estimable. Readers of *The Pact* may feel that Bjørnvig, like Constant, suffered from abulia, that psychological impairment of the ability to decide or act independently. But whatever his failings, he had, like Constant, the honesty to put down *not* how he would liked to have been but how he actually was. And so in *The Pact* the truth, as he wished it, "speaks clean." And because he has written, as Isak Dinesen had begged him to, "entirely from the heart," she would surely in the end have approved of this remarkable document and would have given it her blessing.

—*William Jay Smith*

The pact is made

As an undergraduate I had read *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter's Tales* by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). I knew nothing about the author; who she was concerned me no more than who might have told the tales of *The Arabian Nights* or the Grimm *Fairy Tales.* I did not in fact think that she was among the living, and I was quite astonished when Ole Wivel suggested that we get in touch with her when he and I began our search for contributors to the magazine *Heretica.*[1] He even knew her personally. It seemed fantastic to me that Karen Blixen was alive and perhaps might contribute to the periodical, as Ole Wivel seemed to think was not impossible. In June 1947 we decided to visit her to present our plans, but she happened to be out of the country. It was not until the winter of 1948 that I finally met Karen Blixen for the first time.

I received one day quite unexpectedly an invitation from her to a small dinner party in the winter quarters of her house at Rungstedlund. Karen Blixen wrote that her niece, Countess Caritas Bernstorff-Gyldensteen, was absolutely enchanted with my poems and wanted very much to meet me. When I read the invitation I became slightly dizzy; I was to meet my first real *reader,* one who even wanted to meet me and had said so; moreover, one who was the daughter of a count and a niece of the Baroness! I paused, overcome with excitement; it was as if the door had been thrown wide open to the great world; soon I would stand on the threshold of fame and adventure: I was to be *lionized.* I slept little that night; several times I pulled on my rubber boots and in my pajamas paced about in the cold thicket under the big trees to cool my burning expectations.

The next evening I cycled to Rungstedlund, where I was shown in and introduced to Karen Blixen, her brother Thomas Dinesen, and to the Countess and her family. The ladies wore long dresses as for a formal party, and that seemed a bit unusual in the relatively small winter quarters, as if a ballroom had suddenly been telescoped into a magic box. After sherry and salted almonds, we went in to dinner and I was placed next to the lady of my dreams. The Countess was stately and amiable, and the situation, as well as the sherry, on top of the cold bicycle trip, went a bit to my head.

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1 *Heretica* (1948-1953) was edited in 1948-49 by Thorkild Bjørnvig and Bjørn Poulsen; in 1950-51 by Ole Wivel and Martin A. Hansen; and in 1952-53 by Frank Jaeger and Tage Skou-Hansen. The periodical, which was anti-ideological, revolted against the narrow intellectualism of twentieth-century culture and put its main stress on art as humanity's purest and noblest expression. Ole Wivel (1921-), author, teacher, and close friend of Thorkild Bjørnvig's, has been since 1973 director of the Gyldendal Publishing House.

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After we were seated and Karen Blixen had left the room for a moment, the Countess quickly leaned over and whispered, "I regret that I have not yet had time to read your poems. I'm very sorry, for Tanne [the nickname for Karen Blixen that was used by her relatives and close friends] lent them to me and told me to be sure to read them before this evening. Please, don't tell her that I haven't." My first reader! But I promised not to tell and had no trouble not speaking of it to Karen Blixen. I felt more than odd sitting there, slightly spinning, as if I had stumbled over the threshold to fame instead of making a dignified entry and now had to get to my feet as discreetly as possible. That was greatly facilitated by the fact that the Countess was happily ignorant of my expectations, and suddenly I felt the situation to be completely relieved and burst out in heartwarming laughter. From then on we ate and drank and carried on an excellent conversation about everything under the sun, except my poems. When the evening was over, Karen Blixen invited me to come again soon.

The following spring I moved with my wife and two-year-old son into a prefabricated Finnish frame house across a clearing from Bjørn Poulsen's log cabin, a few kilometers inland from Vedbaek. To this little spot called "Bjørnebo," Karen Blixen often came, walking or cycling, to have tea with my wife and me and sometimes to play with our little son. Under the spell of her presence, he would occasionally perform peculiar dances. Once she exclaimed: "Doesn't he look just like Ophelia in the mad scene?" There was no subject we did not touch on in our conversations, and she repeated her invitation to come to Rungstedlund. From this time on, I went to see her quite frequently and eventually she said that for me the door would always be open; I could literally just walk in. Later in our friendship she amplified her invitation; I could disturb her at any time, even at night, by tossing pebbles at her window, if I had something pressing that I needed to discuss with her. I never dared—and never found the occasion—to accept this characteristically generous offer.

When I reached Rungstedlund, I often found her sitting on an upholstered bench, her legs pulled up beneath her, turned sideways to the window behind her, listening to records. This was always in the winter quarters of her house, and I think she stayed there that entire year. I would sit down and listen to the music without knowing if she had noticed me. I would gaze at her long, sorrowful profile against the spring light or the winter dusk. Perhaps she ignored my presence only while the music lasted, but it sometimes happened that she exclaimed with surprise that she had not heard me come in.

Karen Blixen possessed a special kind of genius. Great talent was, of course, one of its indispensable qualities, but certainly not the only one; only in its organic combination with the rest of her person—mind and body, senses and heart—did talent manifest itself as genius. And apparently it was only in evidence temporarily, under special circumstances, like rare animals or plants. Suddenly it was present, acted and had its effect, and suddenly it was gone. It reminded one of wisdom, but lacked what otherwise is characteristic of wisdom, namely invulnerability and continuity. Almost X-ray-like it would see through the conditions for being and growth in other persons, but abruptly and without transition it would jump from action on their conditions to action on her own. She could with all her heart yearn for responsibility and consistency, but she found it almost unbearable to practice them except in her conduct toward her servants and toward animals. "I wish people would regard me as insane," she would complain. "It would be such a relief."

Because Karen Blixen was a woman of sixty-four when I met her (precisely twice as old as I was at the time) and frequently ill, I experienced this special genius mostly in conversations. As our mutual confidence and spiritual exchange grew with each meeting, one afternoon, as we were strolling in the park and had had an exceptionally good conversation, almost perfectly harmonious

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in its perceptions, she said that I should not write the book about her work which she had originally suggested to me. "That is not the reason we met," she said. "No, we have met for an entirely different reason. I realize that now, and I will tell you one day about it."

Our conversations would usually move from matters concerning contemporary poets and my magazine to more general topics such as Eros and Christianity, animals and the cosmos, the war and vivisection, and our often unexpected and spontaneous agreement did not stop the conversation as so often happens—but simply guided it quickly past all nonessentials, and, as if by mighty inertia, into a kind of happy, productive dimension. Above all, she did not tire of impressing on me the necessity of courage, which she felt was held in low esteem at that time. "Everybody is so unhappy because courage is counted for nothing. People today are brought up to be anything but courageous. To be courageous is neither proper nor fashionable. And so no one can be truly happy, for then one must also run the risk of becoming really unhappy, and that, I believe, nobody is. No, it takes courage to be happy. And this you must promise me: never to be afraid, for then you cannot be happy. And what is there to be afraid of?" she concluded with provocative emphasis.

It seemed to me that she touched the very base of my being and swept aside masses of opinions, concepts, and layers of prejudices I did not suspect I had. To be with her and converse with her was an experience that crossed boundaries and opened up the world. When I left her, whether in the intense light of the early spring evening or in rainy darkness along the seashore, I often felt intoxicated with a tremendous expectation of life, greater than I had ever known before. It was like meeting a person of a kind I had heard about in myth and history, and this impression was in keeping with my having originally believed that she was no longer living. Now I certainly felt her living presence, to say the least. On her side, she developed an unusual trust and confidence in me, which I did not understand, but which I reciprocated unconditionally.

I expressed my emotion and gratitude in a letter written to her on January 20, 1950, the same day she had given a lecture which my wife and I attended. Karen Blixen had often spoken of her loneliness, the loss of her servant Farah,[2] and of the absence of kindred spirits around her. I thought the moment had come when I might simply offer to serve her. I wrote:

> Dear Baroness Blixen,
>
> The stars were large and close to earth and twinkled in the cold last night as we walked home across the fields. It was as if your eyes and your words had drawn them closer. As I walked, I thought of you, of the evening, of the many evenings I have listened to you and conversed with you. Last night was like a long wonderful monologue at a symposium, a monologue about the secrets and the unpredictability of life, a monologue about Eros, eliciting laughter and tears. Who but you could create such a symposium now that the symposium has become impossible? Who but you could speak to an assembly as if it were made up solely of equals, of beautiful people?
>
> If I told my friends or colleagues about all this, they would think that I had been blinded. But I see clearly; there are no steamed-up windowpanes here to impair my view. My eyesight is good; but those who have not seen you cannot imagine how you really are, how wise, how right, how beautiful. It is altogether too common that a writer proves to be a disappointing, dull-gray appendage to his work. I have finally met someone in whom things exist in their proper order, where the work is a splendid appendage to the person, where it is scepter, orb, and staff. I have at last encountered something that has meaning. I have always sought for someone to serve, but have found no one. To command or to serve has been my dream, although I am prob-

2 Karen Blixen's majordomo in Kenya.

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ably not well suited for either. But allow me, all the same, in the time that is left, to serve you. This will likely be the first and last time in my life when such an occasion arises.

Some day in the future I shall speak of you. Just as you speak of your first servant, so one day will your last servant speak of you. Your servant who knows how clumsy he is, and who fails in all things, except one: his ardent devotion,

Yours,
Thorkild Bjørnvig

Karen Blixen wrote back the next day:

Dear Thorkild Bjørnvig,

Your letter gave me great joy. It is very good to know that there is a person I can trust as I trusted Farah. I shall, therefore, now cast my mantle upon you as Elijah did on Elisha, as a sign that one day I shall let three-fourths of my spirit remain with you.

She considered this exchange of letters to be the foundation of our pact of friendship, and later said so. Our meeting was intended to lead to this pact and not to my writing about her work. In our next meetings she explained to me the essence of the pact: it meant that two people have mutual and perfect trust in each other, a trust of a mystic sort which nothing could touch or shake. One day, while I was seeing her home, she spoke of a play by Heiberg,[3] the one in which the young girl says to the hero, who is in great difficulty: "Now, if you have lost your faith in God, believe in me, and I will give you shelter." She could see, as she wrote to me later, that I took it to be more than just a quotation. I felt that the trust we experienced was reciprocal and unrestrained. Its center of gravity might shift, but its reciprocity would remain unshakable.

A few months later when Karen Blixen paid us a visit, she took my son in her arms and kissed him in an outburst of tenderness of a sort she did not ordinarily show. The next day I was called to Rungstedlund, where she received me quietly and solemnly in the front room before the fireplace. She immediately began to explain that her kissing my son would not infect him with her disease. I must have seemed thoroughly confused, and so she told me her bitter secret, which she had assumed I already knew. She told me of the disease with which her husband had infected her in Africa, the disease that she gives to Lady Flora in "The Cardinal's Third Tale," the one that probably was also Nietzsche's, namely, syphilis. She explained how it had cut her off from life, not only from the erotic part of life, but also how it had placed a taboo on any bodily contact. "But it is no longer contagious; it is now harmless—to everyone except myself," she added. Shortly before I left, our conversation turned to Nietzsche, whose *Thus Spake Zarathustra* she had loved since her youth. "Because you know Nietzsche so well," she said, "you must tell me if you have found or now find signs of megalomania in me of the kind he had. And if you do see such signs you must warn me as soon as possible; you really owe me that, it is part of our pact; you must defend my honor."

Convalescence

[During a trip to Paris with his wife, Bjørnvig had fallen ill. Karen Blixen invited him to stay with her while he recuperated.] Near the end of September, I moved into the wing of the house at Rungstedlund with the green room facing west and an adjacent bedroom.

In the beginning Karen Blixen had me eat alone, and in the course of a day we would be together at most an hour before I retired. Bedtime was fixed at nine P.M. by my severe keeper during my stay, which lasted until two days before Christmas. She would inter-

3 Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), poet, dramatist, and critic, was director of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen from 1849 to 1856. He wrote the play in question, *The Potter (Pottemager Walter)* in 1812.

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rupt even the most exciting conversation often in the middle of a sentence when the grandfather clock struck nine. She would then get up and say, "Well, good night, Magister."[4]

She came into the green room at about eight o'clock on the first evening. She sat down across from me and explained thoroughly and at great length the regimen she had in mind for me. She concluded by saying: "Would you consider settling down here with the feeling that your stay is indefinite, as it sometimes was for guests on the old Russian estates? They might stay for a month, but it also happened that they stayed for ten years. That is the way you should feel about it, while you are here, and spend no thought on time." And then she rose and placed a record on the old phonograph, given to her in Africa by Denys Finch-Hatton. But before putting the needle in the groove, she said slowly, "Just listen to the music, think of nothing else. You will hear this piece several times while you are here. The strains will wrap you up and rock your heart to rest in such a way that when you hear it again later in life, you will always remember these evenings and this green room where you first heard it." It was the adagio of Tschaikovsky's first string quartet, and I felt quite overwhelmed, receptive, and completely given over to the situation, taken away from all uncertainties that normally plagued me and from the disappointment of the interrupted stay in France to a remarkable dreamlike and yet wide-awake security. Karen Blixen sat there and gazed out into the September dusk and, once in a while, with kindness and penetration, at her guest. When the music was over, she got up, stopped the phonograph, said good night; and I went to bed with a profound feeling of homecoming.

I was consistently regarded as a convalescent and spoiled beyond measure. I was served breakfast in bed and otherwise left alone to read, take walks to the harbor, in the grove, over the fields and into the woods, and to listen to records. I might not even see the Baroness—she was always addressed in the third person as *baronessen*—for days on end. I would see no one at all but the housekeeper Mrs. Carlsen, who energetically and quietly took care of my meals.

While I was at Rungstedlund, my wife and friends would come now and then to see me, but their visits were rare and brief, as if limited to visiting hours. But once, my wife came over for the evening. Mrs. Carlsen prepared a magnificent meal of pheasant and red wine, served in the green room, while the Baroness was visiting a good friend nearby. We were alone and moved in a mood of elegiac rapture, enjoying being together and having such a splendid meal. We gave ourselves fully to the mood and to each other. But on the stroke of nine the Baroness returned, flung open the door, and sailed in like an ill-tempered swan that feels its brood threatened, bluntly declaring that my wife should go home and that I should go to bed.

There were no limits to the freedom Karen Blixen granted me or to the sovereignty she wanted me to exercise, unless I suddenly showed resistance to something she wanted me to do, something that I found unreasonable but not necessarily difficult, such as carving letters in a tree or escorting her to a certain embassy. She would then stamp her foot and hiss at me, "I can feel the white heat of your cowardice!" As long as just such trifles were concerned, I paid little attention. I always thought that one's courage should stand its test on more serious matters. And I did not yet understand that she could become so excited. When she had shouted and been particularly harsh with me, she would then change key abruptly, come to sit down beside me, relaxed and intimate. With her most beautiful expression that bordered on transfiguration, she would say, "You must remember that deep down this is not at all what I meant to say.

4 Magister designates a person holding the Danish academic degree of Magister (roughly the equivalent of our Master's). Karen Blixen often referred to the author, even addressed him, by this title. It was another decade before he received his PhD.

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You must think of Sophus Claussen's[5] words about the Divine Serpent, 'When in its slough, venomous and murderous, it snorted, "It is all love."' Listen to the magnificent poet." Then she continued, quoting by heart a section of Claussen's poem "Man," and it was obvious that she, with a humorous and triumphant rapture all her own, identified herself with the serpent and life's dragon in the poem:

> I often dare, when nights are inky black, to call on the loveliness that dwells near the gates of death.
>
> And in the sweet siesta hours, when the serpent was charmed by its own big heart, I was chosen for lover.
>
> Then it is imperative to seize the given moment to embrace life's dragon that seeks my life.
>
> But I must rest my hand on the world's steady axis to escape the beast's revenge and its terrible claws.
>
> I love the dragon's ferocity; serpents strike only those who look upon them with poisoned eyes.

Karen Blixen also took great pleasure in acknowledging a kinship with the Devil, who gives one victory and power over everything in this world for passion and plunder, if one promises him one's soul in return. For specific reasons he had, however, given her something else. She told me this one evening in December when she returned to the subject of the disease that had separated her from life, first and foremost the sexual part of it, at an early age: "When that happened to me and there was no help to be had from God, and you should be able to understand how terrible it is for a young woman to be denied the right to love, I promised the Devil my soul and he promised me in return that everything I experienced thereafter would become a story. As you can see, he has kept his promise." We were sitting before the fireplace and for a long time after the final words she gazed mournfully into the fire, and the silence grew as if nothing existed but silence and the barely audible flames. What she had just told me sounded like the truth, a decisive truth regardless of the strange and unlikely framework it had been given. On the other hand, I could not take her quite seriously when she, almost without transition and using the same imagery, would suddenly interject into a conversation: "Wouldn't you like to meet my good friend? Yes, my best friend, the Devil." Such statements she stubbornly repeated and sometimes enlarged upon: "Won't you get up on the broomstick with me?" I was usually taken by surprise and, bewildered, did not know how to answer. I thought a "yes" and a "no" equally impossible, and because more specific instructions did not follow on how one or the other should be carried out, nothing happened. Calmly and deliberately the Baroness resumed the conversation as if her suggestions had never been made.

The days passed and everything about me ran its course as if I were to stay on indefinitely. To Karen Blixen's great displeasure, I not only had friends outside Rungstedlund, but also and worst of all, had a family, a wife and a child. She did what she could to accept this, but she ascribed the failure of my stay in France, among other things, to the presence of my three-year-old son during the last part of it, and her annoyance could, with studied sarcasm, break through in a remark such as: "So you thought you could go out and seek the holy grail with a perambulator, did you?" The night before Christmas Eve was celebrated with all the inhabitants of the house. It was a lovely light-headed evening, during which Karen Blixen ingeniously participated in all kinds of fun and games with her enigmatic smile. She laughed generously, as it befitted a demi-goddess and

5 Sophus Claussen (1865-1931), considered one of the greatest modern Danish lyric poets. He lived for some time in Paris, where he became acquainted with the French Symbolist poets. Karen Blixen called his poetry her "Bible."

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friend of the Devil plunging incognito into a saturnalia. The next morning I went home to my family.

Indecision

In those days, and particularly just after my stay at Rungstedlund, there was a tremendous friction in me between the certainty of what I wanted to do and the uncertainty of my means of realizing it. Karen Blixen had a keen eye precisely for this inner conflict, and time and time again she said both in conversation and in letters, as Jesus said to Martha, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed." Once while she was abroad, and my affairs had taken a turn for the better after a difficult period, she wrote, "When you make it clear to yourself with sufficient force that one thing only is required, everything will obey the order nicely; everything will stand at attention and await detailed instructions." It was true, at least for that situation, but by no means always. Karen Blixen knew well the means it took to realize the one required thing in her world, but sometimes she had no idea whatever of what it took to realize it in my world. She would not recognize obstacles; she demanded that you at least should "throw your heart over the hurdle," as she put it, and it did help to remove or overcome many imagined hindrances. But she wanted to treat real and invincible obstacles the same way, mine and sometimes her own, and much trouble came of her doing so. Her genius allowed her at times to see through this with ease. Just as easily as she could see through one and know what the one thing required was for that person, so just as surely she could lament, "I know it will go wrong, no matter what I do to avoid it. Everything I undertake goes wrong. So it did when I brought one of my servants from Africa to this house and what I am doing with you will also go wrong. I *cannot* refrain from trying what cannot be done."

Karen Blixen and I had agreed that I should visit her weekly or at least fortnightly after my return to my family. Sometimes I arrived in the afternoon if there was something definite we were to discuss. One day it was her story "Daguerreotypes," about which she asked me to give my unreserved opinion, which I did. She flew into a rage when I criticized a few points, only to deliver her grateful approval of my "honest criticism" and my "good judgment" on the next visit. Dinner was served that time in the green room where I had worked for three months. No one else was present; if anyone had been, we would have dined in the other wing of the house. We had coffee after dinner, and I was presented with a bottle of cognac shaped like a pig, which I took delight in emptying.

On this occasion our conversation was without intent or plan, rather like talk in a free-flowing and exuberant symposium. In my advanced state of intoxication I sometimes talked like a waterfall and made statements, guided by some magnetic perspicacity, that one normally must search the heart and try the brain to formulate. Or I was suddenly interrupted by an exhilaration that struck like bolts of lightning and dazzled my entire being. Strangely enough, without drinking anything but a little water and coffee, Karen Blixen literally went along with my state of rapture; excited, attentive, laughing far more frequently than she normally did, now and then gently tugging my hair as she went by me to fetch or arrange something. While I listened intently with my whole being, she said heartwarming things or terrible ones, told stories and reminisced with the chorus from "Daguerreotypes": "I am imagining, for one may imagine anything and everything."

When on such occasions I finally went to bed in the adjoining bedroom, she would remain seated in the green room and, when blissfully inebriated I lay tucked under the comforter, she would open the door and put a record on the gramophone. At times I would fall asleep while the music played, at others, I heard her quietly remove the record, close the machine, and shut the door. The next morning I would usually go

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home without seeing her, but it did happen that I sometimes stayed for lunch, when normally others would be present. My existence had found its center of gravity and point of rest at Rungstedlund and Sletten, where I had my family and a study facing east behind the crown of a lime tree. I felt in all ways privileged and I committed myself completely to the writing of poetry.

More about the pact

After my return from Bonn [Bjørnvig had won a grant in 1952 for summer study at the university there] I again spent an autumn at Rungstedlund, but I was not as unconcernedly acquiescent as I had been the previous fall and my stay was shorter. This time a long-term isolation from my family and friends could not be for reasons of convalescence; it had to be based solely on the necessity of a quieter working environment than I could find at home. This was a flimsy excuse because I had excellent working conditions there also, although the magic atmosphere of Rungstedlund was, of course, missing.

Karen Blixen intensified her interference in my life. She considered it a misunderstanding and a forsaking that I had strong human associations also outside Rungstedlund, and though she might never admit it openly, she did let me know this indirectly and emphatically. It was not that I should have no connections whatever with other people, but they should be conventional and reverent and, moreover, of an adventurous and noncommittal kind. I should maintain an integrity based solely and fundamentally on my relationship with her, that is, on our pact. In the beginning she had tactfully shown much respect for my marriage and she had felt that it was endangered by my coarseness and lack of consideration for my wife. She said that with respect to my more delicate and far more refined wife, I behaved like one "who drove nails with a violin." As time went on she regarded this marriage as a nuisance and a misunderstanding, a drag and a hindrance to what she considered my destiny.

She would come up with the most peculiar things for reinforcement and confirmation of the pact. She gave me, for example, an Indian coat her father had got in trade from the Indians in the forests of Wisconsin: "It will be good for you to wear when you sit and work, warm in the winter and cool in the summer, but this you will know, that if you are ever unfaithful to me while wearing it, it will burn you like a Nessus shirt." And another thing she gave me: Above the door in the green room she hung a piece of wood with an inscribed text that she had quoted often to me—as the second formula for our pact—which under all circumstances and vicissitudes should remain in force. Sometimes she exchanged "I" for "you" as in the past; at others, she said that when I looked at it and read it I should think, with trust beyond measure, that this was how it was between her and me:

> If I take the wings of the morning
> and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
> even there shall thy hand lead me,
> and thy right hand shall hold me.

Karen Blixen calmly put herself in God's place when she felt it necessary. As in the quotation from Heiberg's play, she did so when she was without her faith in God and was unable to believe, for example, in me, but on the contrary thought that I, in my insufficiency and in periods of exceptional exposure, needed protection and somebody to believe in: in her. Or when she was seized by the overwhelming jealousy characteristic of Jehovah and the Greek gods: an annihilating jealousy without shame or restraint, but with the marks of innocence and the right to exercise it. If she hid it and controlled it in any way, she would do so for strategic reasons alone, not because she was in doubt about her right to feel it. In apparent masked objectivity it would show itself for example as definite disapproval. I wrote a letter I did not see again until I was setting down these recollections in which, along

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with Christmas greetings, I told her how I was going to celebrate Christmas at home with friends and music and under the sign of the Christ child. Across the top of this letter in her large beautiful hand is written: IDIOT. This was the opposite of the stern and awe-inspiring generosity with which she said and sang, "Who dares to curse, when *I* will bless?"

She edited the text not just in this case where she changed the "You" that applied to God to "I" or "I" to "You" as in the passage of scripture; it happened in a like manner on another occasion. To explain to her that it did not necessarily mean a split mentality or a breach in the pact that I spent time with my family, with my wife and son, who most certainly meant much to me, as well as with my friends, relatives, and other connections, but that I could still keep a course toward God and fulfill a possible destiny, no matter what kind of destiny it might be, I presented her with one of Franz Werfel's aphorisms from his *Theologumena*. It was an autumn evening during my second stay; we sat talking by the fireside. Already at that time I felt the aphorism, which I had carefully translated with this presentation in mind, to be a bit formidable for the occasion, but I could use it to explain not simply my present situation but what I hoped would some day become my permanent situation:

> God speaks only to the oldest souls, to those that have lived and suffered longest: You shall belong to no one and to nothing, to no party, no majority, no minority, no community even if it serves me at my altar. You shall not belong to your parents nor to your wife nor your children nor to your brothers and sisters, nor to those who speak your language no more than to those who speak another language and least of all to yourself. You shall belong only to *me* in this world. But how could you be mine, except by living unobtrusively in your world like everybody else and yet not belonging to it?

After I had read it to her, she asked to read it herself. I handed her the paper, on which she concentrated a long time. Then she nodded, took a pencil, wrote something on the paper at the top and at the bottom, and handed it back to me. I was greatly astonished by what I saw. She had crossed out the word *God* and had written *I* above it—and below the aphorism she had signed her name and thus had turned it into yet another formula for our pact.

The jealous matchmaker

Karen Blixen wanted me to fall in love but only as the Councilor wants Anders Kube to find love in her tale "The Poet." Although I was very fond of my wife, she did not think my marriage was adequate for my really falling in love. This feeling did not emerge until after my journey to Paris and after she had begun not just to ignore the marriage, but to act as if it did not exist at all. But great love does not make its appearance according to wish and arrangement, invitation, or order. On the contrary, it will nearly always, and particularly when one is well along in life, come uninvited, awkwardly, and at cross purposes to everything; its spontaneity is rebellious, and radical. Karen Blixen made no bones about her wish and played with various possibilities. When, for instance, Countess Caritas Bernstorff-Gyldensteen, whom I had seen a few times since we first met and about whom I had been asked my opinion, was to visit Rungstedlund, she would say, "But where will she sleep? How about the bed next to yours? Wouldn't it be lovely to wake up with Caritas' blonde head on the pillow beside you?" I liked the Countess very much, but not in that way.

As I appeared rather coldly disposed toward this and other suggestions, all of which were introduced and staged with frank frivolity—she meant them and yet she did not mean them—and because in these matters I was unimpressionable or good for nothing but to drive nails with a violin, she began to assert that I ought to take a snake charmer as a mistress. In any case it should be a big, strong girl, a type for which Karen

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Blixen had a special weakness, and one my clumsiness and lack of polish could not faze. A type like that would be what I needed to fulfill my basic (to me undefined) needs, once I had overcome my passion for the frail and delicate. It was not until I left for Bonn that these fantasies became alive and, so to speak, geographically placed, if not topographically so. Ominously enough, there was on the outskirts of Bonn a ridge called the Venusberg which in reality is a monotonous, shrubby, swampy area devoid of snake charmers and the like. Without doubt it was Venusberg that my subconscious wayward fantasies had skirted, but what I found in reality was the swamp. I did fall in love in Bonn, but it occurred far from Venusberg and with a woman of the quality of a Stradivarius, hardly a snake charmer.

Our love could not, of course, remain hidden, and Karen Blixen, to my shocked amazement and my friend's horror, did not regard it as a blessing but as a calamity. It was disastrous in her eyes because my friend was the wrong partner for me and because our respective marriages were threatened. What she, hardly pretending, had hoped for and conjured up had occurred: I was seriously in love. It was obvious that it did not suit her, that it was not what she had in mind, and that it was again a disappointment. But why this vehement reaction that even made use of a Hera-like attitude, that seemed to want to negate what had happened, to undo it—to attempt to perform witchcraft with retroactive powers?

It had struck me in the past that every one of her projects or arrangements that I showed a trace of inclination to engage in earnestly myself had been tabled or terminated, but I had paid little heed to the fact at the time. Now I remembered and understood. Often Karen Blixen did not at all have the nerve or the strength of mind to be confronted with what she herself had implemented. This was one of the reasons things could go wrong, even if they were "objectively" successful. She had reckoned without her monstrous demon of jealousy. I am convinced that this demon could surprise her as much as whomever else she turned it on. I had permission to fall in love; it was good if I did, but, after all, not seriously.

I interrupted my stay at Rungstedlund shortly afterward to tour Norway in the company of several other poets. The Baroness and her secretary Clara Svendsen went with me to the bus stop at Strandvejen, because I had to go to Sletten first. Karen Blixen was wearing a hood, and while I waved and saw their forms fade away in the November mist, it seemed to me for one wild, grimly humorous moment that they looked like the old parson and his wife from *The Angelic Avengers.* Since my first happy autumn sojourn, everything had changed. Each paradise clearly has its limits.

The rupture

When I returned from Norway, Karen Blixen called me at Sletten, where I was to stay for about a week before going on to Rungstedlund, and requested that we meet at once. She came and picked me up in her car and we drove to Store Kro in Fredensborg for tea. She quickly asked a few questions about the trip to Norway, then suddenly grabbed her bag from the chair beside her, placed it on the table, and pulled out a crumpled letter that she handed me to read. It was a letter to my wife from a friend of hers who ridiculed my extended stays at Rungstedlund and advised her to insist that I move home and that she create equally good working conditions for me there. During a visit to this friend's house, I had seen on the dining-room wall a picture like the one entitled *"Avant l'attaque"* that hung above my bed at Rungstedlund. I had commented on it and said jokingly that under that picture I could work anywhere. She hinted at this in the letter and offered to lend it to my wife so that it might hang above my bed at home, if that would improve my working conditions and aid my inspiration. When I was home, before going off to Norway, my wife had mentioned her friend's offer and had given me the letter to take along to read. I read it and

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then put it away with other letters in a closet or drawer in the green room.

Karen Blixen complained that her friends never would have treated her like this; after this letter she realized that they were people different from me; *they* were people with a code of honor. I answered meekly that I had not written the letter, that the letter had not been written for my eyes, and that I did not agree with its contents even if I had enjoyed reading it. She felt that I did agree because I had placed it among my letters. I said that I was far from agreeing with the contents of every letter I got, not to mention those intended for someone else. When she impatiently cut me off and declared that that was irrelevant, I answered that in the end it had to be a private matter and that I had not dreamt that she, in my absence, would read the letters I had kept. She answered that she had given me a key to the drawer and the closet where I could keep them and when I did not use it to lock them up, I had to accept the fact that she would read them. I disagreed with her and suggested that the difference between her honorable friends and me might be, in part, that she did not read their letters without their knowledge. She said that was unnecessary because they did not receive such letters and that moreover it was irrelevant but that she would like an explanation of this letter's contents. I maintained that apparently my wife's friend felt sorry for my wife because I was home so rarely and that she had chosen to express her feelings in a humorous fashion. Karen Blixen did not find this the least bit funny and continued her interrogation; gradually I felt like a suspect charged with something about which he could say no more than had already been said. In the end, she bitterly asserted that she and her friends might make bad mistakes, but never one of this kind, for they had a code of honor and first and last they always observed inviolably at least the rules of classical tragedy.

It became utterly impossible for me to see any reasonable relation between the crumpled and thoroughly studied letter on the tablecloth between us and her momentous conclusion. I did not think it particularly honorable to go into someone else's drawer and read his mail. I would never have been able to do it myself, but I kept silent about such petty details; this was perhaps a code for which I was ill equipped. Or the Devil's friend had rights not given to everyone. In short, I did not know whether she spoke from a plane dizzyingly high above mine, or from one a good deal below, and I was nauseated with shame and discomfort, but I tried to keep all my feelings at arm's length by not saying too much—lying prone, so to speak, during the barrage. She concluded by saying. "The rules of classical tragedy are perhaps the only rules I and my equals, my friends, really have respected and observed; we know nothing of the pity and the mess in the world that you appear to be hopelessly entangled in and from which you apparently cannot free yourself. One of my kind would know that after this we could not see each other again." This vitriolic whiplash of disdain for my love for her, as well as the consequence she drew from it all, almost knocked the wind out of me. After this salvo she rose, but as I moved to pick up the *corpus delicti,* the unfortunate letter, she snatched it up in a flash, stuffed it into her bag, and with a profoundly wronged look declared that she would keep it.

On the way home in her car, I thought the worst was over, but she began talking about our pact and asked me to cancel it because she could not do it herself after what had taken place. "Because *I* cannot do it, *you must.*" In the meantime, she had pulled over onto the shoulder of the road at a lonely spot and stopped the car. Her anger had disappeared, her face was smooth, and I saw only her long profile, as in a somber and sad voice she quoted a stanza I was unfamiliar with at the time, one that she had written when quite young:

In its prison my heart sings
only of wings, only of wings,
none of the world's other lovely songs
beautifully ring in its ear.
Even birds born in cages have dreams

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about freely flying skyward,
and in its prison my heart sings
only of wings, only of wings.

She turned abruptly straight toward me, and bleary-eyed, implored me, as if I had complete power over her fortune or misfortune: "Release me, release me!" and she kept repeating these words as if they were the sequence of a great dirge, while I was at my wits' end, knowing that if I said "yes" I would not mean it, and knowing that I could not say "no" either. I found the reason that I should cancel the pact idiotic and incomprehensible. The great love that I had discovered in Bonn had come to a dead end; it began every morning with a hope I could not kill and ended every night with a feeling of loss and void nothing could fill. And now I was to knock down that which, despite all vicissitudes, was just as dear to me, that which I had thought unshakable and untouchable whatever happened, the firm anchor in the confusion and the last place where my self-esteem had a hold: the pact. And I had to reach the decision myself. "Release me," she said again, but I could not answer. I could only ask time to consider—and she turned the key, started the engine, and drove to the edge of Lave Woods, where I got out and said good-bye.

When I got home I felt humbled and crushed. I became ill, physically ill, and was laid low for a few days, running a high temperature and in a condition of numbness. When the numbness passed, I was finished with the pact; it no longer existed. Fundamentally, I had made no decision. It had been made in me in some place I could not reach at all; I could do nothing about it. Or else it had taken me and put me in another place of extreme loneliness far away from the pact. Again I had firm ground under my feet, breathed freely, and felt as if I were in the wholesome, clean, serene cold of a starlit night. Nothing could seriously hurt me any more. A few days later, I picked up my papers and personal belongings at Rungstedlund without seeing the Baroness.

A short while after this conversation, Karen Blixen sent me a new "anecdote of destiny," "The Immortal Tale," which she previously had promised me, accompanied by a letter in which she wrote as if nothing had happened. It was near the end of November, and some time later she asked me to come to visit her. She was sick in bed, and we had tea in the bedroom at the east end of the house; it was the first time I had ever set foot in that room. I was quite taken by the low windowsills and the sea; it was as if the water came right up below them. The room was paneled with dark wood and reminded me of the interior of a Norwegian mountain cottage. Even now she spoke as if the conversation at Store Kro never had taken place; instead she engrossed herself in my insoluble situation and expressed her deep sympathy. When I took leave of her, she emanated nothing but gentle authority and confidence and I felt completely understood and filled with the intense sweetness of homecoming.

When I next visited Karen Blixen in January, it was with great expectation and renewed trust. Once again the visit turned out to be exactly the opposite of what I had expected, at least in the beginning. To be sure, Store Kro still was not mentioned, but she now held against me my lack of seriousness concerning the pact and once more she put before me a letter, this time one of my letters to her from January 1950. "Your letter of promise," she named it, "the one that gave impetus to the pact between us. And now, just two years later, I trust you can see how badly you have failed, how little the pact means to you and speaks to you. And now I would like to know whether or not you will become serious about it. You must decide now because it cannot work in this manner. It cannot continue this way." As it previously had been up to me to cancel it, so it was now up to me to confirm it, if not to re-create it outright, and no more than I had previously been able to do the former was I now able to do the latter. I did not know how I had failed until I was told, and when I was told, the telling did not include how to avoid failure in the future when I had to live

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my own life and be the person I was. In short, I had no idea how I should go about taking the pact more seriously than I had done so far. In the acute perplexity of the moment, I spontaneously reverted to the decision I made sometime between the conversation at Store Kro and my last visit to Rungstedlund, and I started to say that it was impossible to take seriously something that did not exist anymore, but she interrupted me: "No, don't say anything now, but think it over carefully before you answer and then write to me. But don't wait too long."

Then she asked me to play a record, first the andante of Haydn's string quartet No. 17 and then Schubert's "Faith in Spring" (*Frühlingsglaube*), which we used to play whenever a gloomy mood had to be dispelled and we needed to be cheered up. When the music was over, she suddenly said with her special blend of authority and irresistible roguishness: "What's wrong is that I am not twenty-five years younger. If I were, we could take a two-week trip to Venice and straighten things out. Then there would not be so much to talk about." And with that she launched into jokes and plans about the most remote things and immediate ones as well.

During this period of uncertainty, various decisions had been reached. My friend, who had no children, made up her mind to get a divorce, and I decided to stay with my marriage, not just because I had a child, reason enough in itself, but because I had no choice whatever as I understood things. It came about in the following manner.

Karen Blixen wanted me to excel and to separate myself from middle-class society, if in no other way, by doing something inadmissible, committing some sort of crime, so that I would be relegated from the social context and become dependent on her for protection in my conspiracy. "Whatever you do that is condemned by everyone else," she said, "you can calmly rely on me and rest assured that I will be on your side." She returned to the subject often and, to reassure me how deeply serious she was about it, she once gave me a long, slender silver letter opener with the claw of a lion she had shot in Africa mounted in gold and attached as a small handle. On the blade was the inscription, "I am on your side."

She clearly did not mean a petty crime. It had to be a crime of sublime intent and motive. It had to possess meaning in another and more comprehensive context than the one it violated; to serve and be of a higher moral order, it had to be a violation to fulfill a deeper, more fundamental law, like the law of nature instead of those of social conventions. As an example, Karen Blixen told me of a native woman in Africa who lived with a husband whose behavior was brutal and criminal and how she had helped this woman kill him by inducing him to fall and break his neck. It had been done by magic, and Karen Blixen told me the story to exemplify the ruthlessness she thought might be required to serve the cause of the true good. She regretted that something similar could not be done and was impossible in our civilized middle-class society and that, if it came to such a test, she did not think she had the strength and the nerve required.

If she had had that strength or if we had lived in other times or in another kind of society, I do not think Karen Blixen would have hesitated long in getting my wife out of the way. Not because my wife was a bad person or a criminal, but because she interfered with the purpose of my life, which was to give that life its highest artistic expression under the aegis of Karen Blixen. As it was, she had to be content with simply wishing, and one thing is certain: Karen Blixen wished that my wife not exist and she wished it to such a degree that by this intense, perceptible wish alone and the authority and knowledge of what was best for me that it represented, my wife felt threatened, her very existence called into question. Intoxicated by Rilke's metaphysical treatment of death, which I, although an avid reader of Rilke, had never taken seriously, and by the fascinating resonance of death in Schubert's "The Maid of the Mill" (*Die Schöne Müllerin*) and *Die Winterreise,* which we played

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constantly at the time, my wife went to the brink of suicide. Her suicide attempt, which took place while I was in Norway, was foiled in the nick of time. When my wife told me what she had intended to do, I was shocked and filled with conflicting feelings, a deep and painful guilt and a dull and inarticulate indignation. The intent alone, and the possibility that the attempt might have succeeded, paralyzed, for years thereafter, any effort to break up and leave. It could also be said that it relieved me and canceled any doubt about what I should do. After that I did experience many happy moments in my marriage, although it was doomed in the long run, doomed precisely by what kept it together, the lack of freedom.

For the first time in almost half a year Karen Blixen and I saw each other again at Rungstedlund. For the first time since it had occurred, she mentioned the conversation at Store Kro. She said that she had been terribly excited but that she had not really meant what she said —that I should not take it seriously—and asked me to forgive her. This took me as much by surprise as her remarks originally had. I could not comprehend how something I had accepted seriously and with so much pain was not meant after all. If I had not been made a fool of, I at least felt a bit like a fool and I could not regroup the forces I had committed to accept and live with the rupture. I did not know what to believe and said so.

To this Karen Blixen replied that evidently stronger means were required and that she wanted us to renew the pact and permanently confirm it by the mingling of our blood. Blood was the strongest and most powerful bond between people, she said, and a pact confirmed by blood would constitute an unbreakable convenant. "Blood is stronger than words," she said. Considering the tremendous tensions that existed between us, I thought it better to keep it revokable, that it probably would be best if we got together without any formal pact so that we could be together in friendliness and perhaps feel our meeting to be a plus instead of, as it now was, a continuing minus of mutual betrayal. But because I felt that it was embarrassing to answer her strong proposal in such a way and because I did not know quite how to formulate my response, I decided to wait, and my hesitation was made easier because Karen Blixen had already gone on to the next subject while I was thinking. She usually did so when she felt that nothing worthwhile would come from the pause.

Our conversations were more repetitious and it is difficult to place them in chronological order, with the exception of a few that stand out in their abysmal bitterness or halcyon clarity. When the latter occurred, I could, as if carried by a mighty wave, once again be in the lost paradise under the old spell. Then I would again sit in the green room at a festive table, empty my bottle of red wine and my piglet-shaped bottle of cognac and give myself up completely to companionship. Everything was as it once was except that Karen Blixen now always wore long and strikingly beautiful and elegant evening dresses.

Shortly after one such successful visit, on November 21, 1952, I received a new invitation. I replied that I would come and that I preferred to stay the night. When I arrived and stepped into the green room, she rose, came over and embraced me, and said with remarkable but suppressed emotion in her voice, *"Sei mir gegrüsst, sei mir geküsst"* (Let me greet you, let me kiss you), a greeting she had used in the past when she was particularly happy to see me. It turned into a long and unusual evening.

It was as if our sorrows were all ancient, the most recent of mine as old as the oldest of hers, as if under the pressure of the immense space of time they had become nameless and shapeless and now mixed like oil and nourished the moment's bonfire. I drank white and red wine as well as the final cognac, and as I grew more and more intoxicated we both swung between contemplative profundity and light-headed gaiety. I was completely indifferent to what had happened and what might possibly happen in the future.

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Suddenly she got up from the table and left the room slowly, without a word. She came back a little later with a revolver in her hand. She positioned herself with one hand resting on her high-backed chair, and raising the revolver in the other hand, drew a bead on me, and kept it for a long time. I was not in the least astonished; nothing could disturb my perfect happiness. Everything, I thought, is insoluble: you can never be happier than you are now and so it may as well be now as later. She looked steadily at me and I at her with a mutual, mad understanding. Then she slowly brought down her arm and went back out the door. She came back a little later, sat down, and began to talk as if nothing had happened.

We continued to talk until very late. When I went to bed, she put Tschaikovsky's *Andante Cantabile* on the record player while I lay listening, unbelievably, blissfully intoxicated, risen, so to speak, above myself. I remember nothing of what we talked about that evening, only her salutation, the music, and the one magic movement of her arm as she raised the revolver. Neither of us ever said a single word afterward about that occasion.

A bit later, just before Christmas, Karen Blixen sent me at Sletten some artificial fruit and her story "Babette's Feast," which was finally in print. I answered with the letter about celebrating Christmas in the bosom of my family, at the top of which she had made the notation: IDIOT.

The parting

To understand what had happened to me, I needed an external solitude that corresponded to my internal loneliness. I found it in my summer cottage at Kandestederne, a small, thick-walled cinder-block house located on a dune by the ocean, several kilometers from the nearest neighbor in an uninhabited stretch of dunes, a bit of wild nature by Danish standards and one of the few places in the country where that still exists. As things stood, it was a place after my own heart and one that I really came to appreciate for the first time. I moved in, and in the following years lived there alone for three months in the spring and three months in the fall. I read and wrote and roamed about the countryside along the North Sea.

During the entire year of 1953, the third year since the pact had been established, Karen Blixen and I saw very little of each other. I suppose that we both had plenty to do trying to make out what had happened to us, and both of us worked hard. She worked on the stories for the projected novel *Albondocani* and on her *Baaltale* (Oration at a Bonfire, Fourteen Years Late). I worked on my dissertation and on poetry, a cantata for the university of Aarhus, and translations of works by Hölderlin.

On Twelfth Night, 1954, I dined again at Rungstedlund. As usual, I was the only guest, and Karen Blixen, derisive and gay, was not wearing the accustomed evening dress but rather a Pierrot costume.

This evening began to resemble, more than anything, a bitter satirical play. Karen Blixen had again changed her attitude and now poked fun at my friend, whom I still did not see, and at me because I did not do something about the relationship. But considering what we were like, that did not astonish her: "You with your foolish recalcitrance and cowardice, you, who dare not mingle your blood with another's simply because you're afraid of the sight of blood, and, as for her, don't you see that her soul is no bigger than a pea?" I got quite worked up, but was so taken by surprise that I was totally paralyzed. And she went on with such monstrous jokes about us, about everything and everybody, that I, much against my will, had to laugh and let myself get carried along in a whirl of wild, hilarious, terrible irony; no one looked normal, and no one escaped. It was the perfect nihilism or black mass, and in one way or another it did liberate something suppressed in me, so that I ended up participating instead of protesting.

She suddenly became serious and said, "But I'm always the one who has gone about thinking of you and what I could do for you.

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Now cross your heart and answer: Have you thought of anything but your own misfortune? Have you ever really thought of me, how I was and what you could do for me?" And what answer could I give? It would have been ridiculous to have answered yes and enumerated how, and comical to have answered: No, come to think of it—I have not; or, frankly, I have forgotten. And there was something to her accusations: when one is unhappy one thinks mostly of oneself. So I said nothing, and no words were necessary either. She proceeded to go into detail with an intensity that had the character of a curse. And Karen Blixen truly possessed the ability to curse. What happens to the one subjected to such a curse? As far as I can see, what happens, psychologically at least, is this: the one who curses brings to light everything notoriously dubious in the one attacked, everything bad and inferior and pitiable, and turns it into the principal being, belittles and suppresses everything positive, and then insinuates that this agitated scum, this scarecrow, is, plain and simple, the person cursed. This is exactly how Karen Blixen proceeded, after which she swept up what remained of me with an inexpressibly tender gesture, and put me to bed.

That was the last time I visited Karen Blixen at Rungstedlund. In the days that followed, I suffered a severe mental hangover, first and foremost because of the diabolically ironic and sardonically humoristic excesses, which I felt had had a debilitating effect, not the least when they, as in this case, joined with the curse's total reduction of my person to form a strong chemical compound. For one horrible moment, I felt as if I really, without knowing it but by no means innocently, had accepted her invitation of long standing and had mounted her broomstick with her.

That night Karen Blixen had induced me to deny everything, including my love. Slowly it dawned on me that, wearing different masks, she inscrutably and consistently had opposed and sabotaged the relationship between my friend and me so that it should not reach its consummation *and* that it should not be understood as tragic. I believe that deep down she was set against its attaining any kind of validity, and the last decisive clash between us was fought on this point. That was why my affair was denied consummation by moral indignation, and its tragic aspect denied by ridicule. She demanded therefore tragedy when I sought fulfillment, and fulfillment when I accepted the tragic—and in both cases maintained that we failed the laws of history, the history of which we were part. Our relationship was not permitted to exist, nor even *to have existed.* And her notion of my taking on a snake charmer meant that I should find someone by whom I could be sensually but not spiritually satisfied. Only one person could give me that spiritual satisfaction: the one I was bound to by the pact.

I realized that not just the pact but the whole friendship it stood for had to come to an end: we had gone too far to keep it alive.

Late one morning in September 1954 while I sat working in my cottage on the North Sea, there was suddenly a knock on the windowpane behind my back. I turned around, and there outside stood Karen Blixen motioning to me. I rushed to open the door. She shook hands and said, "I have traveled up through Jutland and have walked all the way out here just to visit you, to see how you are and how you are getting on. Here I am; may I come in?" I was unshaven and in overalls, and in my disbelief and astonishment I had not moved. I now invited her in, took her coat, showed her to a place on the bench at my table. I set about brewing some tea, and when it was ready we sat and drank tea and talked as we had done so often in the past, but in a place I could least have imagined. She told me she knew this part of the country well and that she had been around it quite a bit when she lived at Skagen and wrote *Out of Africa.* She felt that it was a very long time since we were last together and asked if I would never again come to Rungstedlund. "You don't need to say anything now, but could you not just come as in the old days?" she asked. "Then we will not talk about all the sad things at all

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but about something entirely different. I think we have much to talk about; there are several things I would like to ask you. I miss you, and it could be so enjoyable. Don't you think so too?" At that moment, it was impossible for me to do anything but agree, and then she slowly and in a bittersweet manner said, slightly paraphrasing Schubert's "Faith in Spring" (*Frühlingsglaube*), "Some time everything *must* take a turn for the better."

While we sat and talked and drank tea, the weather had changed back and forth between sunshine and heavy showers, between a sudden forenoon darkness and the dazzling reflection from the sea. When it cleared up about noon, she asked me to escort her to her hotel and get her a taxi because she had a luncheon engagement. We left the house and walked the narrow, winding sand path behind the dunes along the shore. As I walked ahead and now and then talked over my shoulder, I barely noticed a large snake —a viper—lying on the wet path in the cold sunlight, hissing and not moving away. We walked respectfully around it, eventually reaching the hotel, and got the only cab in Kandestederne.

The shock of her unexpected appearance had stayed with me during the first part of our conversation and slowly stabilized afterward into a feeling of bitter alienation and embarrassment which I overcame only sporadically. When she emphasized that she had come the long way solely for my sake, I could not remain untouched and bring myself to say that I wished she had not done it. Neither could I without contempt for myself, after all that I had thought and decided, receive her as if everything were fine.

As I walked back to the cottage, the feeling of the visit's unreality grew on me. Karen Blixen had now and then half seriously threatened to haunt me after her death to see what I was doing. In my exaggerated despair, I accepted her remark as a foretaste that I should never get outside her spell and power, that at whatever outermost ocean her "right hand would hold me," and that I should never again become as I once was; far better to be slow-witted, hesitant, and dependent on my own power, my own wings. And all this—combined with the thought of the snake we had seen, which had evoked the deepest discomfort in me, contrary to what I normally would feel—made me believe that that serpent would always lie in one place or another on our path. Its presence had affected me like a sign, something you are looking for when you do not know what is going on in yourself.

When I finally got back after walking for a long while along the ocean, I lay down on the bench and stared at the ceiling. All the progress, all the good results and the peace with myself I had gained by my resolute long solitude had blown away. I found it fundamentally unreasonable, foolish, and strangely heartless to oppose the generous and trusting attitude she had shown by coming to see me. I felt the sweetness of giving in overtake and relax me and I fixed my attention on her situation, trying to see everything through her eyes.

And so my thoughts and feelings wandered from one extreme to the other and began to dissolve one into the other in the days that followed until, prompted by sheer self-preservation, I finally saw clearly that I would have to pull myself together and not only make the break, but also inflict on Karen Blixen the degree of hurt and pain it would take to make it effective, which I had shied away from thus far out of consideration for her, or perhaps out of cowardice. And I decided to write a letter since it had become evident that silence was of no avail.

The day after I posted the letter, I received one from Karen Blixen; our letters had crossed. Her letter was destroyed, I believe, in accordance with her wishes, but I recall its contents fairly well. It was a great relief that I had already written and posted my letter, because hers was beautiful and cordial. She said that she had been very glad to visit me and see me in my new workplace and that if I had been slightly more hospitable, she would have stayed for lunch because the journey to see me had been long and tiring. But she thought that from now on all

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would be well, and that we could see each other with joy and that she had taken our encounter with the viper as a sign offered by her world, a serpent of brass that would protect us and our friendship against all evil.

The following day I received a second letter from Karen Blixen; it read: "Have received your letter, burn mine." With that, everything, including the finale, was over, and there was a great stillness in the universe. One may wonder why it had all been so difficult. The best explanation may be found in this quotation from *Out of Africa*: "There is this about witchcraft, that when it has once been practiced on you, you will never completely rid yourself of it."

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Balthus *by James Lord*
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Martin Green's "Tolstoy & Gandhi" *by Nikolai Tolstoy*
The design exhibition in Philadelphia *by William H. Jordy*

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The fixed moment: the poetry of L. E. Sissman

by Brad Leithauser

Just fifteen years ago, to less public acclaim than one would wish, a surpassingly innovative and accomplished first book of poetry, *Dying: An Introduction,* was published by Atlantic-Little, Brown. Its author, L. E. Sissman, the creative director of the Boston office of a national advertising firm, had recently turned forty. He'd been "introduced" to dying in the fall of 1965 when he learned he had lymphatic cancer. In 1976, eight years after that first volume's appearance (he'd published two other books of verse in the interim, and a collection of essays), Sissman was dead.[1]

An emphasis on dates and durations is appropriate in Sissman's case for two reasons. Perhaps because he sharply sensed his days were numbered, Sissman was ever a writer preoccupied with time—its vastest designs (that pet subject of poets, who seem to feel so acutely the pinching contrast between human mortality and inorganic eternity) as well as its little building blocks, the dated days and hours. With extraordinary frequency his poems include dates or times in their titles, often of such specificity as "December 29, 1949" or "Three-ten, *et seq.*" Sometimes such exactitude immediately justifies itself, as where a war or other world event is commemorated, but often the significance is wholly personal, as where "January 22, 1932" recalls his first dim glimpse of New York as a four-year-old. A reader seeking to explain this precision might plausibly deem it only one manifestation of a wider meticulousness, for Sissman was a poet (and—remember—an ad man) who reveled in minute distinctions and identifications: brand-names, models, manufacturing processes, etc. Yet such reasoning may miss the point. Sissman's preoccupation with time is—I suspect—primary, and all of the particulars he marshalls are enlisted ultimately to fix the moment, to etch it in crisp enough detail that it will survive the erosive wash of days, months, years.

An emphasis on chronology also illuminates the dense prolificity of his achievement. Although Sissman had been writing intermittently for years (he received Harvard's Garrison Prize for best undergraduate poetry back in 1947), it seems he began in skillful earnest only in 1963 and did not move fully into his own until about 1965. At the end of 1974 he came up against a mountainous writer's block that remained unscalable up to his death two years later. In the narrow span of about nine years, then, Sissman composed the true canon of his verse—which, posthumously and exhaustively released in 1978 under the title *Hello, Darkness,* fills nearly three hundred tall pages.

While distinctive and praiseworthy in many ways, this collection excels chiefly in

1 The books of poetry are *Scattered Returns* (1969) and *Pursuit of Honor* (1971), both published by Little, Brown. His collection of essays, *Innocent Bystander: The Scene from the 70's,* was published in 1975 by Vanguard Press.

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its mastery of narrative verse. Of course the narrative hasn't fared well in American poetry for some time—has not, with the luminous exception of Frost, fared particularly well in our century. This is somewhat surprising, given that the modernist revolution was fueled by at least two impulses that would seem to encourage the narrative: a dissatisfaction with the narrowness of accepted poetic subject matter and a recognition that poetry could incorporate the "unpoetic" machinery of modern urban life. (One recalls with amusement Walter de la Mare's assertion, not many years before "The Waste Land" and all the rest, that it would be almost impossible to use the word "bicycle" in a poem.) Yet the earliest American modernists (Eliot, Moore, Stevens, et al.) for the most part ignored narrative, as did a later generation (Bishop, Roethke, Bogan, et al.) whose work was in many ways more straightforward than their immediate predecessors' and hence theoretically better suited to the telling of a story. Even in those gargantuan poems that have arrived in the last few decades—Berryman's "The Dream Songs" and Lowell's sonnet sequences perhaps being the two most celebrated—narrative detail is often thin. Obviously any suitable definition of "narrative verse" will always prove elusive, and one might argue that a poem like "The Dream Songs" recounts its own poignant, if piecemeal, story; yet however "narrative" is defined, surely at a bare minimum it must engender that propulsive suspense which keeps the reader implicitly asking *What will happen next?* In a poem like "The Dream Songs," although various characters and voyages and deaths are indicated, this question goes unasked, for the reader never escapes an impression that the whole haunting poem is taking place, as dreams do, in a single head. In contrast, what keen-edged environs Sissman provides! His streets and buildings and parks and ferry boats lodge securely in the world of three dimensions. One can smell his lovingly replicated Depression drugstores and could bark one's shins on the furniture of his rooms. His characters have names (even middle names) and birthdays and apartments and bills and hobbies. They're not only observed in the enormous acts of falling in love, going to war, battling insanity, giving birth, and dying, but also seen drinking Knickerbocker beer, riding the IRT, eating sticky buns, making business presentations. His characters (and what a simple, but invigorating, innovation this is in American verse) *talk,* not cryptically or tersely or vatically or obsessively, but with the false starts, the wobbly prolixity, the interruptions, and shifting rhythms one associates with good prose fiction—or with life itself. Popping up here and there, these characters flit from poem to poem until a full cast gradually assembles: a handsome and proud mother, a hardworking but feckless father, a wisecracking crew of undergraduate friends, an aristocratic girlfriend, a beloved second wife. One might even be tempted to conclude that Sissman was able to convoke so varied a group because, unlike Berryman, he escaped self-obsession. Yet while Sissman may not have suffered from that egocentricity that benights so many poets, one must fairly admit that the hulking figure at the very center of this cast, under spotlights which in many poems have the cruel glare of hospital operating rooms, is the "ten-thumbed" Lou the Loser—Sissman himself.

Lou the Loser's ultimate fate is a premature, and rackingly painful, death from cancer. This eventual tragedy throws a backward, chilling shadow over Lou's sunnily comic string of setbacks, his expulsion from Harvard for poor grades, his bearish clumsiness with women, his writer's block. Yet the predominant, the final, effect of these poems is neither comic nor chilling. It is triumphant. Perhaps all art is at base oxymoronic—drawing sustenance as it does from its creator's frustrations and failures—but Sissman offers an especially vivid example of someone triumphing, magnificently, by way of defeat.

While form and content may from certain ideal standpoints be inseparable, an open-eyed reader will discover numerous cases

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where a poet shows a gift for one but not the other. Fortunately, Sissman had both something to say and a felicitous way of saying it. A master of technique, he perfected for his narratives a pliant hybrid form that blended blank verse and rhymed pentameter couplets. Often, as in "With Dr. Donothing at Farney End" or "The New York Woman," a poem will open in blank verse and gravitate within a few lines toward those heroic couplets that surely are the most "antiquated" form in English prosody (even more so than the A-B-A-B quatrain, which, significantly, Sissman also favored). And what a regular rhymed iambic pentameter he was capable of:

> At dawn, a raid
> Of color fires the window, and I rise
> And walk out through the lobby, where no eyes
> Follow my progress to a taxi. None
> Sees me down thoroughfares to where the sun
> Summons me, inching up the early air,
> To end a losing game of solitaire.

Nonetheless, rhymed couplets in Sissman's hands hardly seem artificial or old-fashioned; rather, in an age whose unadorned, supine lines begin to look increasingly fatigued, his poems feel robust, resilient, and above all fresh.

"Freshness" may be, of all poetic virtues, the most difficult for a critic to isolate or explicate, but I would like to tender a few suggestions as to why it flourishes in Sissman's poetry. In choosing to work chiefly in blank verse, Sissman encumbered himself with a "heavy" form, one suitable for Shakespearean tragedy, or even for justifying, in *Paradise Lost,* "God's ways to man." Sissman leavens the form by various methods, not least through frequent allusions to precisely those "heaviest" of masterpieces. Most contemporary poets shy from allusion, probably because it was compelled to bear such Herculean loads under Eliot and Pound. In Sissman's case, however, allusion turns unimposingly playful through comic juxtaposition or parodic alteration; he rumples Shakespeare ("Look, those / Are spectacles that were his eyes," "to sea or not to sea"), upends Wordsworth (as in this portrait of a naked girl: "This Sally now does like a garment wear / The beauty of the evening; silent, bare, / Hips, shoulders, arms, tresses, and temples lie"), in one phrase mongrelizes both Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and the "clay and wattles" of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" ("a pleasure dome of Klees and Watteaus made").

A flair for lampooning a classic line was but one feature of a capacious talent for wordplay. Of his contemporaries, perhaps only James Merrill could match him in both prodigality of invention and aptness of placement. The latter is as essential as the former, for even the most ingenious wordplay often tends to fall flat—perhaps more often now than ever before. It certainly seems possible that in our era wordplay becomes progressively harder to employ in verse because of the ubiquity of commercial advertising (a business which, ironically, may have not only supported Sissman but also honed his poetic skills). Most of the wordplay we Americans encounter in a day (and much of it is devilishly clever) arrives through promotions for material goods. Admittedly, the connections between a society and its poetry will always be dauntingly complex, but given the ascendancy of advertising in our lives (one recent study suggested that the average urban dweller is exposed to 1500 ads per day), it appears plausible that even a poem's brightest wordplay, its choicest puns, will at least on a subliminal level carry sullying commercial overtones. Whether or not this speculation is sound, Sissman unquestionably possessed a rare knack for that difficult art of turning wordplay to best advantage.

Freshness is also created through a sort of metrical masquerade; Sissman's rhythms are not what they seem. The reader who does not bother to scan the lines of *Hello, Darkness* will probably not detect their remarkable regularity. The vast preponderance contain ten syllables, and most are iambic with standard variations (trochaic inversions, etc.). The informality of Sissman's language,

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his varied caesurae, leapfrogging linebreaks, and syntactical inventiveness all tend to conceal the steady, monotonic burden of his song.

This metrical grounding helps to cohere the many narratives delivered in disjunctive fragments. Take for example the first poem in the book, the autobiographical "Going Home, 1945," which tells of Lou's summer in Detroit after his freshman year at Harvard. Its three parts, "Getting There," "At Home," and "Away," are further subdivided into a total of twelve sections. In "At Home" the reader by turns is given: a comic picture of the worldly freshman viewing with new, disdainful eyes his old bedroom; an analysis of father-son tensions; a date with a local girl; a boyish tug-of-war, disguised as sophisticated dinner chatter, between Lou and an old high school pal; a wry paean to the city of Detroit; a steamy August evening at home just before summer's end. None of these sections runs more than twenty-four lines. The reader is treated to a brief sketch, one or two burnished details, and then is nudged along. Here in its entirety (with, incidentally, a neat mix of rhymes and off-rhymes) is the portrait of Detroit:

> In this al fresco gallery of Sheelers—
> Replete with stacks and tipples, ramps and hoppers,
> Vents, derricks, ducts, louvers, and intercoolers—
> I wander lonely as a cloud. Here is the beauty
> Of this ridiculous, gas-smelling city.
> Not those gilt towers stuck up so proudly
> To spell a skyline, not those too loudly
> Dulcet and unobtrusively huge houses
> Dotting the northern suburbs. No, the heart
> Of it is where its masters' love is:
> In the cold-rolling mills, annealing rooms,
> Pickling and plating vats, blast furnaces,
> Drop-forging shops, final-assembly lines:
> Wherever angular, ideal machines,
> Formed seamlessly of unalloyed desire,
> Strike worthless stereotypes out of the fire.

Of course this sort of dislocated, fragmentary exposition has been repeatedly attempted in prose fiction—but nearly always with dreary results. The prose usually falters because the fragments do not connect; they are the tesserae of a mosaic that has no glue, such as that which these poems derive from their metrical base.

Time and again Sissman produces cheering demonstrations of the potential inclusiveness of contemporary verse, examples of subjects and approaches that poetry may handle better than prose. A stirring example is "Pursuit of Honor," the title poem of Sissman's third collection. Lengthy for a poem (sixteen pages, nineteen parts), it's actually rather brief for a short story (which it also is). And how much more richness, more humor and memorable detail is packed into these sixteen pages than one will likely discover in a short story of similar length. The plot itself is simple. At the outset of an aimless summer Harvard student Lou the Loser and his English friend Perce decide to move to New York, Lou to court a girl named Honor Fisher and Perce to extend his view of America. Lou pursues his girl fruitlessly; Perce, though undergoing some risible difficulties, has greater success with Honor's former roommate. In the end, Lou returns to Harvard, Perce to England.

Sissman throws into this simple framework a wealth of detail: the apartment these two young skirt-chasers sublet proves a place where "sumptuous / Brown bodies lean on walls, recline in chairs, / And even loiter on the pair of stairs / Up to the toilet," but these turn out to be only the former tenants' cellos and bass viols; the first A-bomb test in Bikini is announced over the radio ("A long boom / Takes several centuries to fill the room"); Honor's diminutive, stuttering father (who shocks Lou with the casual mouth-to-mouth kisses of farewell he bestows upon his daughter) is both a psychiatrist and an amateur magician who belongs to something called the Merlin Society. This last stroke hints at a further network of rewards, for the entire poem is overlaid with Arthurian (as well as Tarot-

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pack) symbolism. Those bumbling undergraduates boozing in Harvard Square bear a cockeyed, winsome resemblance to the Round Table Knights, just as Honor's virginity suggests the Grail. One can hardly envision this layered mix succeeding in a short story (one would expect the tiers to collapse of excess weight), but in Sissman's deft, breezy verse everything combines handily, in large part because with appealing offhandedness he keeps announcing what he's up to—as where Lou jokingly refers to Perce as "Sir Percival," or where "The Passing of the Cup" denotes a cheap mug of beer offered Lou by his "round, unworldly roommate," or where the pun in that "Pursuit of Honor" is made explicit:

> Ah, then, Honor, you have power—
> The broadsword, not the red rose, in your bower—
> But I hold honor, a weak, withered flower
> In my pale, uncommanding, and free hand . . .

The poem illuminates and illustrates that artistic paradox whereby "lightness"—in tone, in language—empowers the poet to handle far more "weight"—artistic complexity, metaphorical richness—than a more solemn approach would permit.

Sissman triumphs also at another sort of narrative which usually totters in prose: the suite of vignettes whose unrelated characters are linked by an overarching moral or intellectual point. In "Our Literary Heritage" the four sections have little in common save that all are ruminations on what it's like to be a twentieth-century American literary man. In the first, set in New York in 1929, a knickerbockered young man swigs bootleg gin while toiling (his false starts and typographical errors preserved) over a piece of fiction. In the second, set in 1946 in Boston, an English professor jumps from a hotel window. In the third, a fictional rustic poet named Godwin—Lowell-like in his celebrity—materializes among queuing businessmen at La Guardia Airport, and in the last, set in 1967, Sissman ponders his own tardily nascent literary career. That third section, particularly, contains in the poet Godwin a winning portrait:

> Then one appears, a rare
> Bird in migration to New York, a bare-
> Crowned singer of the stony coast of Maine,
> And of Third Avenue in rain; a bard.
> The way of the almost-extinct is hard.
> He peers through tortoise-shelly glasses at
> The crowd, the place, the year. He is not here
> And is.

Adept Sissman touches abound here (those internal rhymes of Maine / rain and year / here, that pun on shelly / Shelley), but more impressive still is the passage's suffusive empathy for the man caught in the middle, its insight into the tensions and pathos that result when opposed worlds intersect.

If biographical speculation may be excused, at least about a poet who injected so much autobiographical material into his work, I would like to conjecture that Sissman was, more than most poets, someone caught in the middle, a straddler of opposed worlds. He was half Jew, half Gentile, a bohemian who attacked the "flower children" of the Sixties with a ferocity that even Waugh (a writer Sissman lovingly eulogized) might have admired, a poet who wrote extraordinarily playful "sermons" on the virtues of hard labor, an artist who treated his career in advertising not as a necessary evil but a beneficent corrective: "Whatever I gave at the office," he concluded in an essay that pondered the fifty-five-hour workweeks his job had demanded for the past sixteen years, "I received more in return."

For most people, such conflicts would result only in thwarting counter-urges and dissipated energies. In Sissman's case they seem to have extended his vision, as exemplified by one of his best poems, "Love Day," which highlights three disparately situated characters: Averil Sayward Snow, twenty-three, the beautiful child of an old Boston family; Marshall Schoen, twenty-two, presumably Jewish, who has ascended from his family's dry-cleaning shop to become a liter-

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ature tutor at Harvard; and Averil's husband, Charley Snow, lieutenant on a ship in the South Pacific. According to a footnote, "Love Day" was the official designation for the Okinawa landings, during which Charley Snow is killed by a kamikaze plane. It also marks the day—a moving play on "love"—on which Averil first goes to bed with Marshall. Each of the three, however briefly depicted, holds our sympathy: exhausted Charley, who

> goes below to take a trick of sleep
> In his scant cabin, peopled by a framed
> Portrait by Bachrach of his Averil
> In sweet-girl-graduate cashmere and pearls

—the Jew Schoen, who, in bedding this older, married, aristocratic girl,

> completes
> His manifest destiny: to penetrate
> The world and person of the earlier
> Arrivistes, keepers of the general store
> Of fashions, notions, drygoods, who decline—
> Agèd and inbred—to elect a fine
> Young newcome to entrap their daughter's hand,
> Their bolts and boxes, language, life and land

—the widowed Averil, who, attending a memorial service in Christ Church for her husband,

> sits her mount—
> An off-white pew—with ladylikeness, which
> Is one thing she knows cold, and perseveres.
> What they [the other mourners] don't know, although they know a lot,
> Is at the moment still her secret: what
> The numerous troop of non-red-letter days
> Investing her desk calendar now says,
> Predictably, is sure to come.

That's a brilliant pun which reveals her pregnancy ("non-red-letter days"); quieter, but perhaps even more touching, is the ambiguity of "she knows cold," which suggests both the fierce competency and the frigidity of her highblooded Boston reserve. The reader not only cares about these people but longs to have their stories amplified. Sissman's characters range beyond the page, taking on some of the bony palpability of people in real life. And to say this is to make him a compliment one could offer almost nobody else in the whole field of twentieth-century American verse.

Indeed, Sissman is a good enough poet (to my mind, no one born since he was—in 1928—has yet matched his range and richness) that it may be fair even while paying him tribute to limn his weaknesses and to ask why he might not rank with the best American poets of this century. His virtues are surely formidable: an enviably tenacious memory, a huge (under the circumstances one might even say Brobdingnagian) vocabulary, a profound sympathy for the hapless and the victimized, a wizardry with wordplay, and a powerful, affecting nostalgia that manages to avoid turning sentimental and soft-edged through an almost astonishing conversancy with the hard world of things—the automobiles, the furniture, the paint, the electrical systems which compounded a "half-grown Manhattan," a prewar Detroit. "It is not too much to say, in fact," he wrote in one of his essays, "that in the twentieth century we finally learned to be at home in cities just before they were to become unlivable."

Perhaps his greatest limitation was that, no nature poet, he remained anthropocentric and usually urban in his outlook. Other readers might dispute this judgment, and a critic bent on refutation could easily stuff a hefty parenthesis, cornucopia-style, with virtuoso samples of lovely nature imagery. Yet it does seem telling that these images so often gain their resonance through a kind of witty transvestism, a playful dressing up of the natural in human, urban, modern garb:

> grass, still needing to be mowed,
> Gives rise to Turk's-caps, whose green tapering ball-
> Point pens all suddenly write red . . .

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or:

That dawn out there that paints those loitering
skies
Around St. Ceil's pale lemon, and tints white
Pilasters on its spire the tastiest lime,
Cannot come up the same another time
On morning's fruit machine . . .

or:

Summer still plays across the street,
An ad-hoc band
In red, white, blue, and green
Old uniforms
And borrowed instruments;
Fall fills the street
From shore to shore with leaves,
A jaundiced mass
Movement against the cold . . .

Sissman also occasionally tended toward repetition, especially of jokes (as in "Beyond the pale / Pearl light of day's regrettable demise" in "On the Island," and "beyond the pale / Of ordinary people" in "Two Happenings in Boston," and "Those leagues of fields out there beyond the pale / Fretting of cities" in "The Big Rock-Candy Mountain"), and of rhymes, as in these three conclusions of poems:

And ride to our reprieve of love and pity
For the free burgesses of our death city.
("Death City, 1949")

Unmet, unwelcomed, undeterred by pity,
I walk out briskly to infect my city.
("Scattered Returns")

And stage a pastoral with her as Phyllis
And him as Colin, awkward, forward, witty,
Against the pre-cast forest of the city.
("A Day in the City")

Yet this scarcely seems the appropriate time for any elaboration of Sissman's insufficiencies. That critical task should be reserved for the day when his reputation catches up with his achievement. Although he posthumously received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1979, his verse today remains dismayingly undervalued. As someone who beat all the odds and obstacles to do that most difficult thing a poet can accomplish—create poems that live—he can serve as a model to every contemporary poet who understands that the alternative to life can only be . . . but it would be foolish not to let Sissman himself, so unnervingly eloquent on the subject, have a final word on that fate which is

as bitter as the infinite
Spaces of space, the reasonless and cold
Black holes between the stars, which swallow
this
Year's end without a sound, which swallow us
In distance now and soon enough in death,
From which no journeyman returns.

Sissman—bless him—swam resolutely against the current. For he saw clearly, with a vision whetted by the feral ravages of cancer, where that current was headed; he heard its ominous distant roar, and he recognized that sound for the free-falling tumble through the rocks, down the cataract, into the placid waters of oblivion.

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Architecture

Aedicular modern: the architecture of Michael Graves

by William H. Jordy

For the public at large, Michael Graves first came to prominence with the considerable hubbub that surrounded his Portland (Oregon) municipal building—first the model, then the completed fifteen-story, blockfilling structure itself. The Portland structure was Graves's first "big" commission to be completed. (The bureaucracy took possession of it in 1982, after more than a decade of well-publicized design activity.) The barest recital of its ingredients calls up issues central to Graves's design. Moreover, given the building's prominence just now, it calls attention to some important aspects of the present situation in architecture as well.

If the description of the Portland building reads more like a list than an amalgam, that is because the design stacks one entity or motif on another, much as a child might make a "building" of architectural blocks. As in much so-called postmodern architecture, the result is visual effects that are intentionally collisive.

The first four floors, containing an arcade around the building at street level, are clad in blue ceramic panels. They step back in three tiers (vaguely reminiscent of the stepping back of New York skyscrapers of the Twenties) to create a base for a chunky, cream-colored, eleven-story near-cube, which is laconically punched by square windows. This dumb wallpaper for the "typical" office building is overwhelmed in the center of each of its elevations by large, contrasting, banner-like fields in browns and reds, which blend with the smoky glass of the windows. On the two principal entrance fronts this banner is emblazoned with an image of a pair of giant pilasters rising to swelling capitals; these support a giant keystone. But it is all stage-flat illusion: alternating vertical bands of brown stone and glass rise within a field of glass (all of seven stories high, nine windows across) to simulate "fluted pilasters" on a colossal scale. These are topped by projecting, dark brown, wedge-shaped blocks—"capitals" waiting to be carved. The "capitals," in turn "support" a red trapezoidal field that rises across several more stories to invoke a gigantic "keystone," anachronistically crossed by horizontal window bands. The flanking walls contain comparable rectangular glass fields, each with a row of four more simulated pilasters. Here the pilasters are buttoned at the top with light blue circles to suggest escutcheons, and all are connected by a series of light blue zigzags meant to suggest a ribboned garland, which calls up classical embellishment. All this architectural rhetoric, then, appears as mere signboard quotation on the surface of the commonplace "modern" office building. In fact, most of the color in this building comes, not from different kinds of materials as it appears at first sight, but from plasticized paint on ordinary concrete surfaces. Because of the juxtaposition, indeed, the whole building is sensed as a kind of quotation, and all the more because it displays a complete catalogue of the conventional

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window patterns from which "modern" Main Street has lackadaisically taken its pick: vertical bands and horizontal ribbons, the repetitive dottings of discrete openings, and, finally, the glass wall.

At the top, notched into the "keystone," a belvedere looks out over the city. Above, a floor is set back. On its roof there was to have been an acropolean complex of small, primitivized, peak-roofed buildings, which would have provided a mock village for the city's ceremonial functions—something like a pedestaled piece of Portland itself. Unfortunately, it was scrapped for lack of money, but the model shows us how it was to have looked. The playful, broken form of these miniaturized buildings was to have been reinforced by metal garlands lightly tacked to the side walls and fluttering off them into space—tattered, windblown ornaments suggesting the slightly forlorn gaiety of bunting once the festival is over. More flutter was to have surrounded the huge flying female figure of Portlandia. She was to have been lofted in a swirl of drapery and clouds above the principal entrance, like Bernini's St. Theresa perhaps, or a little like the Prometheus who sails somewhat ponderously over the fountain in the depressed court at Rockefeller Center. Portlandia so bewitched the city that she will in fact take her place on the building once the money can be raised. Her sculptor has decreed, however, that she will be a kneeling maiden (like the White Rock fairy) looking benignly down on her people as they enter to query taxes and water bills.

As the building now stands, it is blunter, more stolid, than it was to have been. All the sobriety was to have been feathered away at the edges with lighthearted abandon, thus completing Graves's affable irony. The irony itself is aimed at a culture less committed than it once was to the functionalist convictions inherited from an early modernism, and ready for monumentality, but still intent on giving first allegiance (and most of its dollars) to the mundane. Graves's heroics are mock-heroics. His fanfare of signs calls architecture to its ancient grandeur, away from the dross of an earlier modernist zeal for the more-or-less bare-bones expression of function and technology. Hence, the charm, both beguiling and problematic, of Graves's work.

Such concern for history is central to the postmodern moment in architecture today, although most of the architects associated with the movement dislike the label. Especially since the 1960s, the study of history has steadily intensified its grip on architectural schools, and the history that is taught there has been conditioned by the allure of color slides: by the theatrical ephemerality and intense color of the illuminated image, by the fragmented simplification of images barely glimpsed in quick succession, by the exhilarating disjointedness inherent in learning by comparison, contrast, and allusion. The shuffle and reshuffle of images offer up endless permutations of the past. Robert Venturi's vastly influential book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), describes the effect. Modeling his own argument on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* Venturi also found seven ways to complicate architecture out of its clarity and simplification and thus to banish the boredom (as the Sixties had come to regard it) of early modernism. He illustrated his first edition with examples from the entire history of architecture, the tiny images laid out in rows, clustered beside the text like slides on a light table.

For Graves, as for many other architects of his generation, Le Corbusier is the starting point. Although one of Le Corbusier's most quoted aphorisms states that "primary forms [of solid geometry] are the beautiful forms because they are easily comprehended," he himself anticipated the current, more complicated modality for design as early as his *Vers une architecture,* now sixty years old and still the single most influential book for twentieth-century architecture. The staccato text (less written than spoken) is accompanied by an array of arresting images, the poor quality of reproduction enhancing their impact as simple shapes freighted

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with meaning. They are so ordered that the mere turn of the pages produces unsettling juxtapositions, pitting the great architecture of the past against what he considered to be the most conspicuously modern objects of the present.

It is not, however, the later Le Corbusier of the sculptural, *brut* concrete buildings that principally attracts Graves. The overtly heroic monumentality of the late buildings —like the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, the Monastery of La Tourette at Evreux, or the governmental buildings at Chandigarh —was more congenial to an earlier generation of postwar American architects, like Eero Saarinen, Louis Kahn, and Paul Rudolph. In varying ways these architects saw themselves as possible successors to the great trio of modernist "form-givers": Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe (perhaps also Alvar Aalto). And in this spirit of immanent succession, the architecture of the postwar architects tended toward the big gesture, with the massive, weighty, deliberate sorts of forms that the desire for monumentality often inspires. Witness the giant nodding piers ranged to either side of the hammock-slung roof of Saarinen's Dulles Airport in Washington or the solemn composition and ceremony of Kahn's Salk Biological Research Center in La Jolla, or the brute tower clusters and bridged forms of Rudolph's School of Architecture building at Yale.

By the mid-1960s, however, such muscular "form giving" was slightly passé. For Graves and his generation, designing with finesse, wit, and knowledge was more to the point. So they instinctively turned back to the earlier Le Corbusier of the taut, white boxes, especially to those inexhaustible Stein and Savoye villas, completed between 1927 and 1931 in the Paris suburbs of Garches and Poissy. This turning back was significant: by retreating to the start of the modern movement, Graves and his generation affirmed their penchant for historicizing. And by substantially detaching the beginnings of the modern movement from the modernism that followed, they made early modernism itself assume the aspect of history. The Stein and Savoye villas especially suited this purpose. As early as 1947, Colin Rowe had subjected the Savoye villa to a perceptive analysis, revealing its concealed Palladian qualities, and many other essays on the villas' historical allusions have followed his lead.

Graves was one of the architects whose work appeared in *Five Architects* (1972), a slender volume that won much critical attention when it was published (its introduction, incidentally, was by Colin Rowe). *Five Architects* contained no one point of view; it was instead a cluster of related positions by a group of New York architects who knew and respected one another. All then stood on the threshold of their professional careers, which the book was also meant to advertise. (This it brilliantly succeeded in doing.) The Five, in addition to Graves, were Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, John Hedjuk, and Richard Meier.

One thing The Five did share was an enthusiasm for the early work of Le Corbusier. They all took a rather formalistic view of Le Corbusier's early work, using its architectural language (which was partially that of early European modernism generally) as their starting points. They focused on the pristine geometry of his thin-skinned boxes, on the proportional systems that gave harmonic order to his buildings, on the frank expression of the supporting skeletal frame, and on the allusions (partly inspired by Le Corbusier, but with Rowe's interpolations) to ancient and Renaissance classicism. Some of the group, and none more than Graves, were also attracted by Le Corbusier's witty introduction of collage allusion into his buildings. Especially important were the fragments that suggested the world of modern technology, like the sheltering marquee over the entrance to the Villa Stein derived from an abstracted cross section of an airplane wing, or the freely curved forms atop the Villa Savoye suggesting the stacks and vents of ocean liners.

The Le Corbusier of The Five, however, was Corbusier complicated. Partly they

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complicated the master's example by fragmenting his work and its principles into its constituent elements, which could then be separately elaborated. In the neo-Corbusian ambience, for example, skeletal frames often stake out a volume that the enclosing box does not wholly follow; or a section of the frame may be rotated so that part of the building is obliquely oriented to the rest; or a relatively simple play between a two-storied space and a balcony overlook will be shredded by stairs, landings, bridgings, and balconies, as though Le Corbusier had lost his way in one of Piranesi's imaginary prisons.

The neo-Corbusians also complicated their mentor's example by crossing it with other buildings in early modernist architecture that offered more opportunities for syntactical complexity. Most especially they revived the neglected early modern work of a group of Italian architects whose work centered in Como in the 1930s. The most familiar example of these is Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio of 1936. They also studied the Schroeder house (1924, in Utrecht) of the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld. Whereas Le Corbusier's primary concern had been the overall effect of the sculptural and image qualities of architectural form, the Italian and Dutch architects concentrated on the manner in which architecture was built out of the elements of the early modern style. The Italians played off the enclosing box against the supporting skeletal cage, and they gave the cage the prominence and gravity of classical columns and entablatures. Rietveld fragmented architecture into primal linear elements (columns, beams, and framing elements for openings) and planes (wall increments) in order to make visible the "build" of the building.

Graves's Hanselmann house of 1967 in Fort Wayne—which appeared in *Five Architects* and which leads off a recent book on Graves entitled *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*[1]—typifies his early work. It is based essentially on a double pair of near cubes. One of these volumes encloses the house proper; the other is essentially a "box" of outdoor space staked out in front of the major living area of the house. It has its own stage-flat front, to which a separate studio (as yet unbuilt) attaches. A stair rises to a door halfway up the stage flat, across a bridge through the outdoor volume of space, and onto the volume-for-living-in behind. The approach by axis, the climb of stairs to an imaginary elevated platform, the emphatic frontality of the house (doubly emphasized by the two elevations)—all allude in schematic, erudite ways to the classical tradition. First Palladio, then Le Corbusier, now Graves, the house seems to say, ticking off the history of its inspiration in an almost pedagogic manner. It is not content merely to be; it must also demonstrate.

Even as one moves along this diagrammatic approach and surveys the front elevation of the principal living area of the house, Graves's complication of Le Corbusier is apparent. There is a collage-like overlapping of cutouts and transparencies, a layering of space into depth, a counterpointing of skeletal frame and enclosing box. All of this is enormously subtle and elegant. And within, the shredding of space vertically and horizontally culminates in a living-room mural by Graves (like Corbusier, a painter as well as an architect). In the mural, cubist-inspired forms—in pale blues, moss greens, pinks, and creams—float insouciantly on and off the wall plane like torn paper. It is as though Juan Gris's architectonic cubism had been crossed with Matisse's colorful gaiety. The full range of Graves's forms appears in the mural: the large assertive shapes, the overlapping fragments, the wispy featherings (reminiscent of the tattered garlands originally contemplated for the Portland building and the fluttering garments of its muse). The forms in the mural allude as well to the way in which the porous architecture opens to its site. (By contrast, Le Corbusier's villas are clear, compact, and, for all their physical thinness, everywhere decisive and firm.)

1 *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981*, essay by Vincent Scully. Rizzoli, 303 pages, $45

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Comparing the Hanselmann house, at the start of Graves's career, with his recent Portland building reveals the major shift that has occurred in his work. Beginning around 1974, a syntactical emphasis, in which early modernism played a conceptual game with classical and Renaissance architecture, gave way to a metaphoric emphasis, in which larger architectural fragments allude to a wider range of the classical past. In this new emphasis, the past increasingly enlarges itself from the general recall of ancient and Renaissance classicism to make more specific reference to Mannerist work of the sixteenth century, Piranesi, and the classicism of the Enlightenment and of early nineteenth-century Romanticism. Design from pieces, so to speak, gave way to design from chunks, or to what might be termed Graves's "aedicular" mode, because the big building conspicuously contains little buildings, or aediculae, within it. In fact, Graves's more recent work contains two kinds of mini-buildings. There are two-dimensional aediculae such as the banner-like architecture blazoned across the Portland elevations; and there are three-dimensional aediculae like the miniaturized buildings originally planned for its rooftop.

Graves's erstwhile companion in arms, Peter Eisenman, lamented this shift in an article entitled "The Graves of Modernism."[2] He asked, in effect, whether Graves had abandoned the serious task of reinvigorating modernism for the frivolity of manipulating nostalgic imagery. In *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981,* Vincent Scully shows himself to be more favorably inclined toward the change in Graves's work, but he, too, sees problems in it:

> Michael Graves' architecture . . . depends in fact upon two words: "allusion" and "illusion." Its forms consistently allude to others and make us see what isn't there. As such it comes as close to carrying out a linguistic program as any architecture can do. More than the work of any other architect it is a conscious attempt . . . to create architecture through a semiotic method. But architecture is not only or even primarily sign and allusion; it is above all else three-dimensional mass and defined space. In one kind of balance or another with nature it creates the entire human environment, and is experienced physically by human beings—experienced empathetically, in what might be called a pre-semiotic state of perception.

Both criticisms imply that Graves's architecture possesses an insubstantiality of imagery more appropriate to literature than to architecture. But Graves's aediculae may provide a solution. This new strategy of design, which Graves is still developing, has several important implications, not only for Graves's architecture but also for the broader situation in architecture today.

In Graves's more recent work, the building is both brought into being and commented upon by classicized forms generated at three levels of thought and action. Through the three-dimensional aedicula, the classical allusion occurs as what might be called *quasi-actuality* because it contains space which can be lived in as a piece of the larger building; but, as a mini-building, it also appears as an emblematic entity (much as a dog house may invoke its master's domicile by miniature mimickry). In the two-dimensional aedicula, the classical allusion appears essentially as *sign,* to be seen but not lived in. Finally, in the use of such underlying principles as certain kinds of proportional systems or rhythmic organization, classical allusion appears essentially as *concept.* None of these three levels depend upon literary sentiment. All are architectural in nature, and all can be acted upon in architectural ways. The key to their union is, in fact, the three-dimensional aedicula; insofar as it alone unites within itself the potential for elaboration as abstract principle, as sign, and as real space for occupancy.

Graves came to use the three-dimensional aedicula when he abandoned the omnibus box of open space that had characterized

2 Peter Eisenman, "The Graves of Modernism," *Oppositions* 12, Spring 1978

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the modernist ideal and chose instead the clusters of discrete, room-like spaces organized in a formal, hierarchical way. Louis Kahn is an evident source of inspiration; and, behind Kahn, his early "old-fashioned" training in what was both the ante- and anti-modern mode of academic architectural composition promulgated by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which dominated American architectural training from the 1890s into the 1930s. Kahn opposed the undifferentiated openness of modernist *space,* substituting for it the traditional ceremony of *rooms.* So another classicizing source, that of the Ecole, joins the roster of historical ingredients in Graves's work. But not to give Kahn all the credit, we should recall Le Corbusier's lifelong enthusiasm for the Carthusian Monastery of Ema near Florence, which he visited in his youth. There the monks' cells were fitted as individual mini-houses around a garden court. The aedicular cell, as Graves uses it, is very evident at Ema.

Graves uses aediculae in order to allude to classical architecture of the past in the process of extending this tradition in the present. He has no intention of literally imitating or adapting the past in the manner of nineteenth-century eclectics. Like most (but not all) of his postmodern contemporaries, he deliberately, even a bit too self-consciously, primitivizes the forms of classicism. This widespread primitivism has several reasons. Most simply it is a matter of economics, where the expense of craftsmanship (or even of machine-stamped replicas) generally dictates that a simple cylinder must suffice for a fluted column, or a blank wedge for a capital. But it is also a matter of maintaining a visible dialectic between history and modernism: blunt cylinders and wedges accord with the pure geometrical shapes that used to be the "beautiful forms" of modernism. Their very bluntness suggests the newness of this historicism, as a primitive phase leading to future splendors. This primitivized generalization of form also accords with the ideal of "type" so omnipresent in the current architectural situation. Again, it is not specific, literal historicism that is wanted, but the essence of history—"metahistory." By condensing architectural themes, the aedicula has close affinities with the type. As both a miniature of the large and a simplification of the complex, it invokes the primitive hut, a mythic source of architecture and a cardinal theme of architectural history for Graves and many of his generation.

Both the archaism and miniaturization of Graves's buildings-within-buildings recall garden structures, and indicate his particular sensitivity for the impact of nature on architecture. The approach to the Hanselmann house, for example, crosses the Palladian villa with the nineteenth-century American porch. On the Portland building the belvedere near the top calls the distant mountains to mind, even for those on the ground; the roof becomes a site for a village; the projected metal garlands billow out into space like the vines that he repeatedly uses in his drawings as fluttering relief to architectural geometry. These buildings in which the classical space responds to the landscape in a Schinkelesque manner are, thus far, both the most beguiling and the most distinctive in his work.

In some of Graves's configurated clusters—like the Environmental Education Center for Liberty Park in Jersey City or the Public Library in San Juan Capistrano—the aedicular structures make a peripheral village around a central space. In New Jersey, the structures show log-like rustication, heavily exposed timbering, and pergolas; in California, they are Mission-style, with latticing, partly off the core space and partly around a garden courtyard (like Le Corbusier's Ema). And there are Graves's country and suburban houses. Some are spread as villages of mini-buildings on generous sites, but most possess the block-like compactness of eighteenth-century English and American colonial country houses. All have swaggering, mini-building entrances, comprising cylinders as columns and giant wedges as keystones. The compact block is extended to its landscape setting by pergolaed links to aux-

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iliary outbuildings or by walls treated as stage-flat architecture. Garages, arbors, bath houses, studios, guest cottages, tool sheds: all are prime subjects for aedicular elaboration. Even tall hedges, for which Graves has a special fondness, appear as wedges and blocks, sliced with narrow allees but retaining a building-like bulk, geometry, and presence. Variously placed as closures, climaxes to courts, gardens, swimming pools, and patios, these structures and sculptured hedges make rooms of outdoor space, extending the rooms inside. Perceived from one point of view, these outdoor spaces are axially balanced; from another they are subtly angled and asymmetrical. Aside from Schinkel's, one senses the influence here of the plan of Hadrian's villa or Gianbattista Nolli's map of Rome of 1748, both favorite historical icons of the moment (they were favorites of Kahn as well). In fact, Graves was one of several architects invited to Rome in 1978, each of whom was given a different section of Nolli's map to redesign.

Vincent Scully has observed that this classicized pastoralism may owe much to the idyllic quality of Princeton, where Graves both teaches and works, and to David Coffin's scholarship at the university there on country villas of the Italian Renaissance. It is in his arcadian commissions especially that Graves's sensibility is most at home: he playfully conjures both illusion and allusion, mingling buildings with nature and offering up architectural references both erudite and witty. It is for these buildings that his fluid but incisive drawings also seem most apt.[3] Their style, at once relaxed and disciplined, accords perfectly with their theme. These drawings, probably the most widely prized of any architectural drawings today, are abundantly reproduced in *Michael Graves: Buildings and Projects 1966-1981.*

But finally one must ask: Is this hothouse accumulation of historical influences too recondite, too pretty, too strained, even too literal despite its intentions? Do the spectral signs of past architectural grandeur embody what they invoke? Or do they leave us in a fantasy realm, charming perhaps, but more nostalgic and precious than real? Does the dialogue between modernism and historicism—or between the old modernism and (what is paradoxically) the new—address issues of consequence, or does it deal merely with ephemera? Are these historical borrowings absorbed into the commission at hand, so as to enhance the sense of the function, place, and time of the architecture, or presented as a mannered self-referential glossary?

Such questions of appropriateness, concreteness, authenticity, and relevance have been asked of the work of all those who are identified with postmodern architecture. They are questions not yet resolved in Michael Graves's work. That modernism could not continue forever without history (or with the pretense that it was free of history) is generally acknowledged. That the present interest in history has raised fresh issues and opportunities for modernism is equally undeniable. It is certain as well that only those, like Graves, who take history seriously and who use it with discrimination can ultimately free themselves of the present sense of history in architecture as merely a source for quotation and commentary.

Graves's aedicular strategy of design is promising however in the way it layers its historical meaning in a cross section of plies: concept, sign, and actuality. His use of the aedicula may be the means by which concept and sign in his buildings will become more concrete. It may be the means, too, by which his engaging doll houses, dog houses, and guard houses, clinging like barnacles to his buildings, may come to affect the shaping of the mass in a more integral way. Indeed, his recent designs for office buildings in Louisville and San Antonio seem to show that this is beginning to happen.

3 Both were shown in a fine exhibition of Michael Graves's drawings at the Max Protetch Gallery in New York from May 12 to June 25.

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Theater

In search of the good Shepard

by Mimi Kramer

Sam Shepard has been "goin' down big" in New York this year. In addition to the off-off-Broadway revival of *Tooth of Crime* earlier this year, Shepard's *Fool for Love* opened to rave reviews this summer at the Circle Repertory Company a few streets away from where the Cherry Lane's revival of *True West* has been playing all year. And two more Shepard plays are scheduled to open at La Mama in September. For a playwright who has insisted, for the last ten years, that he doesn't want to be a playwright at all, Sam Shepard has become an oddly permanent fixture on the American theatrical scene.

An aura of mysticism surrounds Shepard's plays. Just as they seem to find their way to New York almost against their author's will, so their form and genesis has been attributed to some other-than-human force: "The stuff would just come out," as Shepard put it in a 1974 interview, "and I wasn't really trying to shape it or make it into any big thing." But "disciplined" is a word the critics also use to describe his plays, and Stanley Kauffmann labels Shepard our "best practicing American playwright."

This mysticism, in fact, seems to hover over almost everything written about Shepard to date. The vocabulary of Shepard criticism—among people who write seriously about drama as literature—comprises words like "shamanism," "totemism," and "mythology." But the most mysterious feature in all this is the inability of critics who think Shepard is good to say *why* he is good.

Take, for example, a hefty volume of criticism from a couple of years ago entitled *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard.*[1] With its wide-angle cover photo of a sky-blue Packard coming at you from out of several thousand kilowatts of sunset, *American Dreams* is the sort of book that really makes you wish you had a coffee table. The introduction, "Alphabetical Shepard," is not a sustained piece of prose on a set topic (such as: "Why Sam Shepard is Worth Two Hundred Nineteen Pages of Your Time") but instead a collection of the editor's spasmodic thoughts. Here is a typical example:

> The jazz artist teases the audience into following his rhythm for as long as he can keep it going, lifting them to a tantalizing high, taking them down, bringing them up again, one tempo to another, a little bit at a time as if they were caught in a sexual embrace with music that continually forestalls the orgasmic response of applause and shouts. The most powerful solo parts in Shepard's plays have that same erotic effect which is what makes his writing sexy though there's no actual sex in them: it's the rhythm of sex not the representation of it. Shepard's seduction is linguistic—a coming to language than [*sic*] to speech.

1 *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard,* edited by Bonnie Marranca. Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981.

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This is but a foretaste of the insights to come. Inside we are told by one critic that "This sense of 'nowness' celebrates in a personal way the human scale of the theatrical experience." One academic locates in Shepard

> a series of constantly changing dramatic images, each of them carrying at least the promise of emotional content—audience empathy as *coitus interruptus.*

The director of the Playwrights' Program at Juilliard discloses that "Shepard's passion for dark, ominous visions and greater abstractions runs a clear course back to Hawthorne and Melville." And we meet a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania for whom the "scene in [*Buried*] *Child* in which Tilden cleans the corn and then gently covers his sleeping father with the shucks" was "one of the most remarkable scenes" that he can remember having seen on the stage.

American Dreams, as its editor points out, is not "one long monologue in praise of Sam Shepard"; it is a series of long monologues in his praise. But nowhere in the book—amid the articles, essays, and interviews, the solemn treatises on how aspects of his life reflect "recurrent themes" in Shepard's work, the accounts of how various Shepard *opera* came to fruition—is there a single word addressed to the question of whether Shepard's work really merits all this attention. The subject has not even been touched on. In the realm of question-begging, *American Dreams,* I think, is down on its knees.

The position of a book like *American Dreams* is not by any means unique in the canon of Shepard criticism. What seems to have set the tone for current attitudes toward Shepard (and unwittingly excused him from having to be a better playwright than he is) was Elizabeth Hardwick's review in 1967 of an early Shepard play, *La Turista.* Hardwick's review, like so much else that has been written about Shepard since, consisted more of description than of exegesis—plot summary interspersed with observations about contemporary life extrapolated from the play, rather than a discussion of the play itself. More important, though, Hardwick's review assumed a value in Shepard's work without seeming to recognize any need to demonstrate it. In fact, far from wanting to analyze Shepard's play, Hardwick maintained that its very interest lay in its obscurity, in our inability to explain the play, even to ourselves. For Hardwick, the value in Shepard's work was that it lacked the "order" that had "been the heart of European fiction and drama."

> Incident after incident, each growing out of the other, united in a chain of significant motivation, of cause and effect—moments of human destiny strung out like beads on a string. This is what we mean, perhaps, when we say we "understand" a work of literary art. Yet each decade brings us the conviction that this order is no longer present to the serious writer.

Such an assertion, unaccompanied by argument or explanation, takes criticism out of the realm of rational discourse. But Hardwick's review did more. By putting the burden of proof on the audience to appreciate the play rather than on the playwright to affect the audience or the critic to persuade, Hardwick placed Shepard, by means of tone and implication, above criticism. She did not spare the unappreciative audience, however:

> The night I saw *La Turista* the American Place audience was, for the most part, utterly depressing; middle-aged, middle class and rather aggressively indifferent: a dead weight of alligators, dozing and grunting before muddily sliding away . . . . But, indeed, what good does it do a man to go and see something he won't like just because the reviewers have told him to do so? He would be better off at home.

It was an *ad hominem* approach: I think Sam Shepard is good and anyone who doesn't like him is a philistine. Well, now the wheel has come full circle: "If you don't like this play," threatens Clive Barnes in this morn-

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ing's *New York Times* advertisement for a play currently running on off-off Broadway, "I don't like you." His tongue is in his cheek, of course, but the play for which he saved this particular gag was Shepard's *Fool for Love.*

Sam Shepard is not as good a playwright as everyone says. On the other hand, he is a far better playwright than one might be led to suppose from the quality of his followers' thought. What makes Shepard seem so much better than he actually is, I think, is the fact that what he does well is precisely what American playwrights—great and mediocre alike—have consistently done badly if they bothered to do it at all: to use the form of theater to artistic advantage.

For most of our "great American plays," the stage is an embarrassment. Take an example from a recent piece of widely acclaimed theater: Marsha Norman's Pulitzer-Prize-winning play *'night, Mother.* It requires one naturalistic set and takes place in the space of time taken to enact it, yet the extent of Norman's achievement was to prove that preserving the theatrical unities is not enough. The set, so ostentatiously detailed in all its ghastly accuracy, was put to no physical or metaphorical use by the playwright—it was not a battleground for the conflicting values of life and death, it was not a place where anything had happened. It was simply the setting for a play. Consequently, like the clock so prominently displayed on its wall and so carefully synchronized to accord with "real time," it just sat there, a pointless monument to the waste and folly of theatrical contrivance.

Shepard's *True West* at the Cherry Lane Theater is an example of a play that uses theatrical space well. In it two brothers squabble in a suburban kitchen in Southern California. One is a Hollywood screenwriter with a family upstate, the other a desert rat who makes his living stealing home appliances from people's houses. In the course of the play we watch the brothers alternate between envy and derision toward one another, exchanging (in addition to blows) wistful fantasies of each other's chosen way of life. Each brother voices a half-formed plan to invade the other's world and each challenges himself to try the other's trade. The desert rat tries spinning fantasies for mass consumption and the screenwriter tries breaking into houses. In the space of what seems like a single night a perfectly good typewriter is destroyed and all the toasters in the neighborhood wind up on "Mom's" kitchen floor. Also, "Mom's" kitchen itself, is completely trashed.

The Cherry Lane Theatre is not always an easy place to be while all this is going on. But the space created and then destroyed there is used to good economy. "Mom's kitchen" is an ambiguous territory, neutral but violently contested. Neither brother actually belongs in this house, but each has an equal claim to be there. Because Shepard is not primarily interested in the psychological realism of sibling rivalry, however, "Mom's kitchen" takes on a sense of place on an ironic level. Neither brother really wants to lay claim to this territory. For each it is a worthless stopping place on the way to some fantasy or away from some regret. Even the monstrous Lee, who cannot seem to remember from one moment to the next what he was saying, when he was last on the desert, or what he was doing there, has, we find, a vision. To Lee a "real nice" house is one that doesn't have a watchdog. But the house outside of which he lurked threateningly on one of his nightly "tours" was, he says,

> like a paradise. Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tiles all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other. (*Pause*) Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know.

The wimp-like Austin, meanwhile, has an equally unrealistic vision of what life on the desert is all about. Its naïveté enrages Lee:

> Hey, do you actually think I choose to live out in middle a' nowhere? Do ya'? Ya' think it's

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> some kinda' philosophical decision I took or somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here!

What keeps these revelations, unlike the endless series of revelations in *'night, Mother,* from seeming simplistic or contrived is that they do not form the substance of the dramatic action. They are merely sideswipes in a larger conflict raised by a single dramatic action: Lee's boast that he can write a better story treatment than Austin, better because it would be "real."

At the end of Scene 2 Austin asks Lee to make himself scarce the next day because he is planning to meet with a producer over the project he is working on. "No sweat," says Lee. He blackmails Austin for the keys to Austin's car and on his way out tosses over his shoulder,

> Hey, ya' know, if that uh—story of yours doesn't go over with the guy—tell him I got a couple a' "projects" he might be interested in. Real commercial . . . . True-to-life stuff.

Needless to say, Lee comes back early the next day, bearing a stolen television set. We think he's about to ruin everything for Austin: he pockets the producer's lighter, rambles on about Kirk Douglas, claims to be a keen golfer, and chats the producer up about a story idea. But the producer leaves with a vague promise about lunch and a game with Lee next day and a suggestion that Lee get his brother to help him write the treatment for the story.

Later that night Austin, over the typewriter, is pleased to be contemptuous about Lee's story. According to Austin, people

> don't end up chasing each other across the Panhandle. Through "Tornado Country." . . . And they don't have horses conveniently along with them when they run out of gas.

But the producer's judgment, the following day, is that Lee's story "has a ring of truth . . . . Something about the real West." To Austin, "There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue." But because the disputed territory of "Mom's kitchen" is the setting for a battle over another "disputed territory," it is fitting for us to be trapped there. We may not love being there, but we are there for a reason.

"So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie," Lee dictates to Austin as the lights go down on Act I:

> Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep riding like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going.

"It was *them,*" said the woman from Scarsdale standing outside the Cherry Lane during the intermission. "The ones he was talking about just before the lights went out. All that stuff he was saying in the story, you remember? About chasing each other and not knowing that the other one was afraid? Well he was talking about *them*!"

Where are the obscurities of yesteryear? In 1967 Elizabeth Hardwick wanted to defend Shepard's genius against ravening hordes of women from Scarsdale and their indifference. In those days—the late Sixties and early Seventies—Shepard was engaged in writing avant-garde theater. The purpose of avant-garde theater, of course, is to push back the limits of an audience's capacity to be shocked or upset, and accordingly Shepard's plays during this period were not what you might call "audience-friendly." They weren't hostile to the audience; they just weren't particularly concerned with being accessible. Shepard's plays, during this period—highly influenced by the experimental theater groups in whose midst Shepard began writing—tended to present words, images, characters, and events bearing no relation to one another and little relation to reality. "Surreal," people called them; they allegedly had a quality of "mythic realism." Shepard himself and some of his followers maintained that his work was meaningless,

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that, as one director put it, "It's always hard to tell what, if anything, Sam's plays are 'about'—although they are unmistakably alive." To try to locate meaning in Shepard's work was, according to Shepard, "a dangerous area" because "once it goes off into the so-called meaning of it, then it's lost, it's gone away." Elizabeth Hardwick, on the other hand, maintained that the kinds of plays Shepard was writing—"the episodic, the obscurely related, the collection of images, moods"—were the only "serious" kind of writing one could do for the theater because "the connections . . . in drama" had "become like those in poetry."

In 1967 it must have been hard to tell how good a playwright Sam Shepard was; but in the mid-Seventies Shepard declared his intention of trying to write a different kind of play, "very stark and not so flashy and not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything." The plays that followed, did, in fact, become increasingly conventional, increasingly "not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything." Stripped of the jargon of the avant-garde, *True West* and *Fool for Love* give us a chance to see how breathtakingly banal Shepard really is.

I saw *True West* twice. The first time John Malkovich played the part of Lee, and sitting in the first row of the tiny theater I felt properly menaced. But even directly under the vacant stare of Malkovich's mindless smiling violence, I found the degree of anxiety produced by what was happening on stage to be roughly equivalent to the anxiety I usually suffer during the chase scene at the end of *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break.* The second time round Lee was miscast: Bruce Lyons, though he played well, was too young and unthreatening. He was rather cute, in fact. On this occasion the audience seemed to be enjoying themselves much more: shrieking with laughter and practically falling into the aisles. On second viewing I realized that *True West* reminded me of nothing so much as situation comedy.

What partly gives the play this quality of middlebrow family entertainment (and one could almost imagine it adapted into a prime-time television series) is its structure and the nature of its comedy. The crude level of irony at which the gags are pitched, the general reliance for comic effect in each scene on cheating the expectations raised in the preceding one, the short scenes framed by punchy opening and closing lines: it all seemed to cry out for commercial interruptions. But even more distinguishing was its ability to find a conflict so harmless that it poses no threat to the audience: nothing is at stake. Throughout *True West* one's interest is engaged by the problem of which brother has the upper hand. This keeps changing and Shepard turns the tables on us skillfully. But to what end—for what is there, ultimately, to choose between a desert rat and a writer of made-for-TV screenplays?

Shepard's use of stage space promises to make some point about the nature of fantasy. In the published version of the play he warns that the set for *True West must* be a realistic kitchen not stylized in its design. The stage set for *True West* at the Cherry Lane is marvelous: you know that kitchen; you have seen it a million times. But with the opening line—"So Mom took off for Alaska, huh?"—you also know that you are someplace between the normal and the bizarre, a world where kitchens are familiar but where people just take off for Alaska without raising comment. In the course of the play Shepard will manipulate our assumptions and expectations so as to make us doubt the normalcy of the situation. Incredible things begin happening and because we hear them from an unreliable source—Lee—we wonder whether they are true. It turns out that they are; but all the while that the brothers' situation is becoming increasingly "unrealistic," there is always that realistic stage set falling, scene by scene, into a deeper state of dilapidation.

The implicit promise in the tension Shepard has created here is that, with the return of "Mom," who, as Lee puts it, "don't like even a single tea-leaf in the sink," some reference point will be restored to the world of the play and will demand of us some judgment on the problems of reality that the

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play has posed. Of course, this never happens. "Mom," when she appears, turns out to be half again as flaky as anything going on in the play. The brothers' behavior and the state of the kitchen barely provoke comment, and she is soon gone again, leaving Lee and Austin to resume their battle to the death. The play even ends with the brothers facing it off in freeze-frame.

Shepard is certainly aware that he has reneged on his play's promises and it is even clear why: he simply does not see the mechanism of a moral or metaphysical reference point as a necessary part of theater. Shepard is not interested in judgments any more than he is interested in irony and delusion; consequently his play performs the same function for his audience as *I Love Lucy* did: it passes the time.

Like *True West, Fool for Love,* at the Circle Repertory Theater, promises to make some comment on the nature of reality and fantasy. The promise is implicit in the play's very title: the word "fool," after all, implies the recognition of some error or deception. But, like *True West, Fool for Love* never gets beyond a trite statement that fantasies exist.

In *Fool for Love* we encounter a pair of star-crossed lovers whose romance is awkwardly tinged with incest. On the surface, the main focus of the play seems to be the fate of May and Eddie's stormy and steamy relationship—or rather its ontological status. "How many times have you done this to me?" challenges May. "Suckered me into some dumb little fantasy and then dropped me like a hot rock." "It's no fantasy," Eddie assures her; and, sententiously, May replies, "It's all a fantasy." Eddie—with his soiled jeans, his tragic limp, and his cowboy boots stuck together with duct tape—is apparently having an affair with some sort of "countess." For May, only the jealous fantasy is important:

> I can't even see you now. All I see is a picture of you. You and her. I don't even know if the picture's real anymore. I don't even care. It's a made-up picture.

But as May and Eddie rehearse and rehash the long passage of their meetings, we find that the central dramatic action consists in an attempt to establish the truth not of the present, but of the past. The arrival of another character, Martin, the "date" whom May has spoken of and whose existence we have been led to doubt, provides May and Eddie with an occasion for offering accounts of how a half-brother and half-sister could innocently become lovers. May and Eddie, like Austin and Lee in *True West,* are fond of spinning yarns; but since each story is discredited almost as soon as it is told, the central conflict in the play is a sort of contest over "truth" in storytelling.

Like *True West, Fool for Love* requires a single set and uses theatrical space well, to a point. Throughout the action of the play an old man sits in a rocking chair to stage left, nursing a bottle of Tennessee whiskey and watching the play. That he is or may be Eddie and May's father (by two different women) gradually emerges and the Old Man becomes a central figure in the stories they tell of the past. The use of lighting and stage space makes clear that the Old Man and the pair of lovers exist on two different planes of reality: one exists only as a figment of the other's imagination. The underlying question of the play is: *Whose* imagination? Sometimes Eddie smiles at the Old Man, pours him a drink, or addresses him directly; at other times both May and Eddie seem unaware of his existence. But, always, the Old Man is smiling or chuckling, and finally, when he doesn't like the story being told, he becomes involved in the action of the play. At the end of *Fool for Love,* when May and Eddie have left separately, the Old Man goes back to his rocker and delivers the final pronouncement. Addressing no one in particular and pointing at a blank wall, he says:

> Ya' see that picture over there? Ya' see that? Ya' know who that is? That's the woman of my dreams. That's who that is. And she's mine. She's all mine. Forever.

As a statement about delusion this leaves

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something to be desired; as a *demonstration* of delusion it is a total failure for the simple reason that, intriguing as all this is, we have not a clue how the different levels of reality are meant to relate to one another. The Carrollian question, "Which dreamed it?" has never been answered.

I assumed that the ambiguity, though irritating, was intentional. But the soon-to-be-published playscript explicitly states in the stage directions that the Old Man "exists only in the minds of May and Eddie." I saw the play twice and thought it was the other way around. So did all the people I spoke to who saw the play. So did all the people whose reviews of *Fool for Love* I read. What would Sam Shepard say about this? Would he fault his play? the audience? Or would he say it doesn't really matter because the audience's response is of no importance and the play has no meaning anyway?

The question is worth asking since the tie that seems to bind the Shepard "school" together is a view of theater which diminishes the importance of the audience's role in the theatrical experience. When Elizabeth Hardwick chose for rhetorical purposes to deprecate the audience and make their response seem of little consequence, the particular kind of theater she was championing had already done that very thing. Sam Shepard and the experimental theater groups around which he "grew up" as a playwright were the heirs to a movement in avant-garde theater that had sought to disturb the traditional audience-actor relationship and replace it with something else. The alternatives found by groups like The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, The Polish Laboratory Theatre, and the Performance Theatre Group ranged from making the audience victims of open harassment to making them participants in a sort of mystic religious experience. Somewhere between the two extremes emerged an approach to theater that did not effectively seem to care whether an audience was there or not. Each of these (largely improvisational) groups claimed to be searching for the one salient characteristic of the theatrical form, the thing that made theater itself; and ironically that was the first thing to go: for historically the only thing that defines theater and separates it from its roots in religious ritual is the presence of an involved but nonparticipating audience. It is the audience that transforms theater from a spiritual experience to an intellectual one, and it is the premise that the playwright has something to communicate to the audience that keeps theater from regressing to religion.

Shepard's early affiliation with Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre may go a long way toward explaining some of the contradictions in Shepard's ostensible views of theater and the role of the playwright. For there are contradictions. The early Shepard made it clear that he viewed theater as a private experience and the presence of the audience as an intrusion. This no longer seems to be the case: precisely what the inane comedy and wistful visions of plays like *True West, Fool for Love,* and *Buried Child* do so well is to locate and control the audience's feelings and frame of reference. But to what end? Ultimately, Sam Shepard has precious little to say.

Shepard is not a playwright who can dispense with an audience or with "so-called meaning." He cannot afford to. Already, for all his sense of theatricality, his ear for language, and his skill at handling conflict, Shepard's brand of theater teeters dangerously on the brink of ritualism. A playwright who cares to do no more than control his audience's feelings is merely a priest in borrowed robes.

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Art

The return of the nativist

by Hilton Kramer

Of the many attempts that have lately been made to revive the defunct reputations of provincial American talents and restore them to their former position as revered national classics, none has proved to be more forthright in its intention or more lugubrious in its realization than the Grant Wood exhibition which opened this summer at the Whitney Museum in New York.[1] Organized by Wanda M. Corn for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and accompanied by a catalogue/monograph published by the Yale University Press,[2] "Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision" is clearly the kind of exhibition that is designed to strike a blow on behalf of a cause. What it sets out to achieve is nothing less than a major revision in the historiography of twentieth-century American art. This, indeed, is not only the most interesting thing about the exhibition; it is almost the only interesting thing about it. The art itself is pretty feeble stuff where it is not simply ludicrous.

For some time now the pressure has been building, both in academic circles and in the art market, for the readmission of certain "regional" painters to the canon of accepted masterworks—the canon upon which the study as well as the exhibition of American art is based—and this exhibition obviously owes its origin to this impulse. It would therefore be a mistake to regard it as just another undirected episode in the waxing and waning of individual reputations. Something else seems to be involved here—something that goes to the heart of our recent cultural history. I doubt if an event like the Grant Wood exhibition can even begin to be understood, in fact, except as part of some larger attempt to reverse the course of that history and render it more amenable to the influence of certain extra-artistic standards. The revenge of the philistines has taken many forms in recent years, and in this instance we are given a particularly vivid glimpse of what its deleterious consequences can sometimes be.

Fifty years ago, at a time when our modernists were an isolated and embattled minority, the self-proclaimed regionalists of the American Scene movement enjoyed a position of great prominence among the painters who dominated the American art world. Regionalism was widely considered to be both a good thing in itself—perhaps, in the view of many, the only good thing in American art there was—and a more authentic mode of American expression than the "alien" styles of the modernists. This was a

1 "Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision" was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York from June 16 to September 4. It is currently on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (September 25-January 1), and will then travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (January 21-April 15) and the M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco (May 12-August 12).

2 *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* by Wanda M. Corn. Yale University Press, 168 pages, $29.95

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view commonly upheld not only in the Midwest, where the regionalist movement originated, but even in New York, where institutional opinion still tended, two decades after the Armory Show, to dismiss much of modernist art as a hoax or a fad if not an outright conspiracy of malevolent outsiders. No doubt this was one reason why the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929 to advance a very different view of the modern epoch, exercised such extreme caution in exhibiting non-representational art in the first years of the museum's existence. When the Federal Art Project commenced its operations as a means of providing artists with jobs during the Depression, regionalism was given a tremendous boost, acquiring a kind of semi-official status as a government-approved style. The anti-modernist prejudice of the regionalist school could draw support, moreover, from a wide spectrum of social and political opinion. It was something—perhaps the only thing—that the Chamber of Commerce, the Communist Party, the New Deal bureaucracy, and the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art could all agree on. The fact that a more virulent version of this anti-modernist position was already official government policy in Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany seemed to bother no one—except, of course, the lonely band of modernists struggling for survival.

Because of the immense esteem and influence the regionalist school enjoyed in the Thirties, its fall from critical favor in the Forties constituted a momentous event in American cultural life. Henceforth the outlook of American art would become increasingly cosmopolitan, and provincialism would not automatically be regarded as a virtue. Not only were a great many individual reputations shattered in the process—and Grant Wood's was certainly among them—but an entire attitude toward art and culture was suddenly stripped of its authority. Nativism (as this attitude can best be described) turned out to have been peculiarly dependent upon the isolationalist ethos that more or less collapsed with America's entry into the Second World War. In the more internationalist perspective that emerged from the war effort, regionalism in art lost its aura of authenticity, and, without government programs to support it, it also lost its principal patron and a large part of its public, if not indeed its raison d'être. At the same time, the growth of the New York School during the war and postwar periods was rapidly making the ideas of the regionalists look parochial and insipid. By the Fifties the international success of the New York School was so complete and the taste for modernist art which it brought in its wake so widespread that the art of the regionalist painters could confidently be regarded as a dead issue for everyone but a handful of die-hard provincials nursing their grievances against a cosmopolitan culture they could neither appreciate nor ignore. It seemed most unlikely that their star would ever rise again.

But in art, no less than in politics, every victory brings its share of unintended consequences, and the success of the New York School has by no means been exempt from this inexorable law of history. By the very act of bringing an unprecedented prestige to the accomplishments of American art, the New York School opened the way for the wholesale revaluation of our entire artistic heritage. An earlier generation of modernists was the first group to benefit from this altered perspective on American art, but eventually the revaluation process reached into every corner of American art history, lavishing a rosy critical glow—and thereby conferring a new price tag—on everything from the humblest artifacts of anonymous folk artists to the most ambitious productions of forgotten academicians. Thus, by a curious twist of fate, it was the $2,000,000-plus sum paid for Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* that led to the six- and seven-figure prices subsequently paid for certain nineteenth-century American landscape paintings, just as it was the exhibitions called "Modern Art in the United States" and "The New American Painting," which the Museum of Modern Art sent to Europe in

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the Fifties, that led the way to "A New World: Masterpieces of American Painting, 1760-1910," which the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston will be sending to the Louvre in March 1984.[3]

Sooner or later this revisionist impulse, which in the course of time has often degenerated into a smug and uncritical belief in the excellence of just about anything produced in the name of art in the United States, was bound to turn its attention to the regionalist school. Yet this development was remarkably slow in coming to fruition. The revisionist juggernaut plied its merry way through some pretty remote and unpromising terrain before it got around to a serious revival of the regionalists, and one naturally wonders why. It would be nice to think that the sheer mediocrity of the great bulk of regionalist painting was itself an inhibiting factor, but that is probably too optimistic a view of the matter. (After all, mediocrity has proved to be anything but an obstacle to the revival of a great many minor nineteenth-century American painters and sculptors.) Other factors seem to have played a role.

What was needed, I think, before the revival of regionalism could really take hold and attract the kind of patronage and scholarship that such revisionist enterprises require for their success was a whole combination of changes in both our outlook on art and the way we support it. A growing disenchantment with modernism—or the feeling, at least, that the modernist movement may have run its course—accompanied by a return to realism in contemporary art and a renewed admiration for the kind of academic and salon painting that flourished in the nineteenth century: all of this certainly has played a role in preparing the way for the revival of the regionalists. So, too, has the elevation of American folk art to a position very close to parity with the finest achievements of fine art. The success of the Pop Art movement must also be counted as an influence in this development, if only because of the degree to which it legitimized a certain vein of jokey commercial iconography as a museum experience. For the appeal of regionalist painting, such as it is, is the appeal of academic art pretending to be folk art and calling upon the devices of commercial illustration to deliver its simplistic and sentimental "messages." And make no mistake about it: regionalist painting is, above all, an art of "messages."

Even so, the revival of the regionalist school would probably not have materialized on anything like its present scale without the intervention of a support system that makes it all but mandatory for the "provinces" to be accorded a place on the national art scene that their actual creative accomplishments can only very rarely be expected to justify. At the heart of this support system are the various agencies of the federal government which not only provide large sums of money for scholarly research and for the organization and circulation of exhibitions but which also, whether intentionally or otherwise, exert tremendous influence on the way private patrons (corporations, individual collectors, etc.) dispense their favors. In this respect, we seem to have come full circle since the Thirties. It was the government art programs of that decade that elevated the regionalist school to its semi-official status, and it is the government art programs of our own day—in their ethos as much as in their specific policies—that have proved to be an indispensable factor in the revival of this school.

Given these developments, it was surely inevitable that Grant Wood would at some point be selected to play a key role in the effort to revise the history of American art at the expense of the modernists who have been in the ascendant since the Forties. At least two of Wood's paintings—*American Gothic* (1930) and *Daughters of Revolution*

3 "A New World: Masterpieces of American Painting, 1760-1910" is currently on view in Boston (through November 13) and will then travel to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington (December 7-February 12) before going to the Louvre (March 17-June 11). This exhibition will be discussed in a future issue of *The New Criterion*.

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(1932)—have come to enjoy a firm place in the folklore of the American imagination. If this is not quite the same thing as being accepted as artistic masterpieces—and it most assuredly is not—it has nonetheless earned for the artist a special status in American cultural history. This is a great advantage, of course, in any attempt to rehabilitate an artistic reputation and revive a school of painting, and it is by no means the only advantage that the champions of Grant Wood can nowadays call upon in their drive to re-establish his eminence. Wood went to considerable pains to make himself a certain kind of emblematic figure—a midwestern regionalist and chauvinist, shameless in extolling native virtue (whether real or imaginary) and ruthless in rejecting anything that smacked of "alien" (which is to say, foreign or cosmopolitan) tastes and influences. He is therefore a handy instrument for anyone wishing to turn back the cultural clock to the so-called good old days when the experience of art was perceived to be no more problematical than a church supper or a corn-husking bee.

Or he would be if only both the man and his art were not so abysmally phony in almost every important respect. To the extent that Grant Wood can be said to be a distinctive or representative cultural figure, it is this very spuriousness that makes him so. And the best place to begin to understand the pervasive fakery of the art as well as of the man who produced it is in the pictorial imagery that Wood placed at the center of his work: all those vacant wholesome faces that look like nothing so much as painted toys in a children's game called "Iowa Farm," and all those immaculate marzipan landscapes in which no farmer could ever soil his hands and where the only disaster likely to occur is a stomachache from too many sweets. This imagery, far from reflecting the artist's midwestern "roots" as an Iowa farm boy (which is the usual claim), was a calculated lie from start to finish—the fantasy of an emotionally retarded adolescent sensibility desperately seeking refuge from the realities of life in a dreamworld of his own invention. That the depiction of this dreamworld proved to have a large public appeal is scarcely surprising, for it is in the nature of such cultural anodynes to be popular. This, after all, is what they are primarily created to be, and lying is essential to their purpose. Truth—truth about life or truth about art—can never be counted on to be quite so comfortable or comforting.

Wanda M. Corn gives us an important clue to the fantasy element in Wood's painting when she observes that "It would be his peculiar mark as a regionalist, in fact, to paint very little of the 1930s life taking place outside his Cedar Rapids window." Again, in describing the prose autobiography that Wood left unfinished at the time of his death, Corn writes: "Like his regionalist paintings, the memoir renders a rosy, mythical account of boyhood on a midwestern farm." And further: "Writing in the 1930s as a city artist, not a farmer, Wood looked back at his childhood through a veil of fond memories and sentimentalized the adventures of rural boyhood." This is a theme to which Corn frequently returns in her discussion of the life and art of Grant Wood. Whatever her failures may be as a critical guide to the artist's work—and I am afraid they are fairly grave—Corn has been extremely candid in giving us an account of his life and its relation to the work. Alas, she doesn't quite seem to grasp the fact that much of what she tells us belongs more properly to the realm of psychopathology than to the realm of aesthetics. The truth is, Grant Wood's compulsive need to invent an idealized childhood dreamworld rendered him utterly incapable of dealing with the life of the "region" whose painter-laureate he set out to be, and no account of his painting—or, for that matter, of the whole school of regionalist painting—can ever be expected to make much critical sense until this peculiar psychological deformation is given its due. Among much else, it serves to remind us that regionalist painting, while wholly dependent upon the techniques of representation, has absolutely nothing to do with the aesthetics of realism.

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Though he was born on a farm near Anamosa, Iowa, in 1891, Grant Wood was never a farmer himself. Even as a child, apparently, he performed few chores on the family farm. His father was the farmer, and Wood never got on with him. "His relations with his father were tense, unresolved," writes Wanda Corn; "for his mother he had a tender, adoring love." When the father suddenly died in 1901, Wood's widowed mother moved the family to the city of Cedar Rapids, and the protracted Oedipal idyll that was the dominant emotional experience of the artist's life unfolded without further conflict. It was in Cedar Rapids that Wood lived much of his life thereafter, remaining closely attached to his mother and acquiring patrons—for mostly straightout commercial hack work—among the local businessmen. It was not until he was faced with the prospect of his mother's imminent death that he married a woman older than himself (a grandmother, in fact) at the age of forty-four, but the marriage was not a success. One has the impression that women were never much in Grant Wood's line. When he got to be famous as an artist, however, he liked to dress up as his father, so to speak, always donning farmers' overalls whenever it came time to play the regionalist painter in public. With Grant Wood, it is sometimes hard to know where the family romance ends and the calculations of the shrewd careerist take over.

He seems never to have been interested in anything but art, and he lacked neither talent nor training for his chosen vocation, nor opportunity to practice it. He went right from high school in Cedar Rapids to the Minneapolis School of Design, then the University of Iowa, then the Art Institute of Chicago, never staying anywhere for very long but determined, all the same, to become an artist of some sort. For a time his life was divided between teaching school in Iowa and studying art and traveling in Europe, and it was then—in the Twenties—that Wood produced most of his few credible paintings—brushy landscapes in a late nineteenth-century French style that suggest a talent waiting to be developed. It never was developed. For at the same time Wood was also producing ghastly confections like *Cedar Rapids, or Adoration of the Home* (1921-22), a panel painting that looks, as Wanda Corn remarks, "like an altarpiece of a Madonna and child surrounded by saints," but was actually a celebration of small-town family life, complete with a cow, a horse, and the requisite toy figures in farmers' overalls, commissioned by a Cedar Rapids realtor's office to promote the sales of houses. No doubt Wood needed the money that hack work of this kind brought in, but there is no sign that he suffered any conflict in producing it. On the contrary. In the work of his so-called maturity he found a way to make kitschy subjects of this sort more universally appealing by giving his pictures a folksier look and more workmanlike surface. The promise we glimpse in the French-style landscapes of the Twenties simply evaporated in the miasma of boosterism and commercialism to which Wood signed over his talents as soon as the folks at the Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce proved willing to pay for them.

None of this would be worth recalling if Grant Wood had not become a celebrated figure in the annals of American art. His neuroses were not unusual, after all, and he was neither the first nor the last of our talents to sell out to an easy market and a provincial standard. But celebrated he became—and influential, too—and this makes his case a particularly painful one for the student of American art history, or indeed for anyone attempting to come to terms with American cultural life of the Twenties and Thirties. For how could this childish, trashy, dream-world "vision" have come to be embraced as a representative expression of American life? The answer most certainly does not lie in the fact that Wood somehow touched an archetypal vein of midwestern rural experience. He never got near it, and actually seems to have known little or nothing about it. He glossed over its every difficulty—not to mention the difficulty that a more serious artist might have faced in coming to terms with

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the real thing. Finally it is this, I suppose, that accounts both for Wood's initial success on his own home ground—not among the farmers, of course, but among the boosters of Cedar Rapids—and his subsequent celebrity as a representative of the regionalist school: he told the country exactly what it wanted to hear about a way of life and a vein of experience it preferred not to look into too closely. It was perfectly appropriate, then, that it was in the Thirties—when the real life of the midwestern farming communities suffered the worst crisis in their history—that this fantasy version of their existence enjoyed its greatest popularity the country over.

That we should now once again be invited—by several of our major art museums, a major university press, and the two National Endowments—to look upon this shallow, hapless artist as some sort of American classic worthy of reconsideration is a sure sign of the collapse in standards that is more and more apparent with every passing season. The bulk of Grant Wood's art is not of museum quality, and should therefore not be presented to the museum-going public as if it were. Even the two pictures for which he is best known occupy a place in our minds that is not exactly determined by our interest in art. Just about everybody now finds *American Gothic* and *Daughters of Revolution* pretty funny, but it is doubtful if the former was ever intended to be so, and both pictures, in any case, now enter our experience as examples of Camp. We are amused by them, we are made to feel superior to them, we think they are "good" just because they are so "bad," etc. But this tends to be true of a great deal that we see in the Grant Wood exhibition. It simply cannot be taken seriously as painting, so we are obliged to look for another way of encompassing it. Wanda Corn solves this problem by treating both the Wood oeuvre and the whole regionalist school as a historical phenomenon calling for some sort of vindication. But this, too, is part of the Camp phenomenon that afflicts our museums: the academics take the trash seriously, the cognoscenti are pleased to laugh over it, and the public is deprived of any useful guidance in determining artistic quality.

Actually, the only really absorbing section to be found in the Grant Wood exhibition—the only part of it where one finds some real evidence of serious *thought*—is in the gallery devoted to the political cartoons that over the years have been produced as parodies of or takeoffs on *American Gothic*. Here at least, we feel, there is something that touches real life, that moves beyond the boundaries of provincial boyhood fantasy and enters the world as we know it. But on reflection, of course, we come to realize that these cartoons, amusing and instructive as they are, do not belong in an *art* museum, either. All in all, if "Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision" is an augury of exhibitions to come in the remainder of the Eighties, we are in for some dark times.

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Books

History without people

by David Gress

The kind of history popular today among publishers, journal editors, faculty search committees, and students themselves is very different from what it was only a decade or so ago. No longer is it the story of diplomatic conflicts and international relations. Nor is it the story of the evolution of political systems of rule and the gradual shaping of democratic institutions. Nor is it, even, the history of the cultural and intellectual environment, the background in civil society of these and other changes affecting the lives of many. Rather, it is a form of social history, in which the study of global patterns of production and exchange and the assessment of quantitative changes in the size of populations and their economic behavior is supposed to provide an adequate account of human society.

To replace the grand narratives of the older traditions, adherents of the new have been producing in recent years their own historical tomes. Fernand Braudel's three-volume work, the first volume of which was published recently in English with the title *The Structures of Everyday Life,* is probably the most important of these. Another, more rigorously Marxist effort is Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System,* of which two volumes have so far appeared. A third, coming this time from an anthropologist, is Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History.*[1]

1 *Europe and the People Without History* by Eric Wolf. University of California Press, 504 pages, $29.95.

Wolf's book is, as the title indicates, a survey with a message. The survey is of the developing global capitalist economy from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. After stating, in the preface, that "the project for this book emerged from the intellectual reassessments that marked the late 1960s," Wolf presents the message as follows:

> The central assertion of this book is that the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality. Concepts like "nation," "society," and "culture" name bits and threaten to turn names into things. Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they were abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and increase our share of understanding.

In other words, history is a seamless web of human relationships, no single part of which can be understood in isolation. Moreover the proper study of history is only impeded if we "turn names into things," that is, if we reify concepts derived from abstract philosophies or ideologies and treat them as normative standards or causal forces. Presumably, no one would quarrel with these observations. Let us see, then, how Wolf lives up to his own claims.

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In his introduction, Wolf attacks the idea of "an entity called the West . . . a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations." This idea apparently spawned a triumphalist version of history as a "moral success story," in which "the winners prove they are virtuous and good by winning." Allegedly, this "myth-making scheme" still flourishes in the classroom. It is responsible for the perverse belief that the rise of the West and its associated political ideas and institutions ought to be of some interest and even moral importance for Westerners, and even that the United States as idea and as reality has, at times, been driven by other than purely social and economic forces coupled with greed for land and wealth. This false notion was responsible for the "intellectual instruments for the prosecution of the Cold War" and its outdated vision that the United States was creating the conditions for democracy in the "Third World" by encouraging modernization, Western style.

As Wolf sees it, there are two enemies to overcome. One is the Eurocentric and politically focused manner of viewing and teaching modern world history; the other is the particular understanding of social science that lies behind it. The former is a straw man which exists largely in Wolf's imagination; the problem today is not that the teaching and writing of history is either narrowly political or Eurocentric, but that it is so much the opposite that basic familiarity with the course of political developments in the modern world is in danger of being lost. As for the latter, it is predicated on a typical American misunderstanding, namely that history is a social science in method as well as in presentation.

The principles that guide Wolf's own investigations, far from being stunningly original, turn out to be mainly those of Marxism, in particular the notion of the "development of underdevelopment" invented by the economist André Gunder Frank and now vastly popular, for overtly political reasons, among third-world economists and their allies in Western governments and universities. In practice, it boils down to the assertion that the wealth of the industrial West is predicated on the exploitation of the rest of the world. If old-fashioned Eurocentric history concealed the truth by seeing Western Europe and North America alone as the subjects of history, the new history tries to demonstrate that the weakness and poverty of non-Europe are causally related to the strength and wealth of Europe.

This central assertion, which constitutes the main argument of Wolf's book, is a form of the Leninist theory of imperialism. On this view, Western overseas expansion and political control in the early modern period were simply "covers" for the deployment of increasing amounts of capital and of the political power made possible by capital. Expanding world trade served the growing global needs of European capital, ruining older societies in the process. Capitalist growth is thus founded on the exploitation of the "peoples without history" outside Europe, and not on Europe itself, its traditional institutions, practices, and culture.

Although he uses a good deal of space in his book to deal with the finer points of Marxist exegesis and the views of other scholars, Wolf does not discuss any of the criticism that has been leveled by responsible economists and others at what one may call "the global exploitation theory of capitalism" and at the underlying worldview of which it is a symptom.[2]

From the outset Wolf has betrayed in two very serious ways his claim to view the "totality of interconnected processes" as broadly as possible. He has chosen for his prism a theoretical model that, whatever its merits when it was first proposed, is now increasingly dubious and suspect. And he has simply decided—while pretending not to have—that politics, institutions, and ideas are of no causal importance in history,

2 For example Peter T. Bauer's *Dissent on Development* (Harvard University Press, 1972) or W. Arthur Lewis's *The Evolution of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 1973).

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that, in fact, the notion that they are is an ideology justifying Western supremacy or at least a means of isolating the developments in the West from those in the rest of the world.

Fortunately, Wolf the ideologue does not always win out over Wolf the anthropologist. Parts of his treatment of global cultural patterns, of the influence of ecology and geography, and of the consequences of the European voyages of discovery for both the Europeans and the indigenous cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas are thoroughly interesting and fascinating in their own right. Wolf's style in these sections is generally lively and anything but jargon-ridden. The focus throughout, but especially in the second section, "In Search of Wealth," is on the Americas, though the Orient and Africa are dealt with as well. Wolf's anthropological reading is wide and his capacity for drawing together the results of widely disparate sources is impressive.

Even in these narrative sections, however, Wolf takes economic relationships, trade, and the ways in which political power affects economic conditions as the whole of reality. His basis is the classical Marxist notion that the "mode of production" is a means of understanding how "social labor" is "mobilized to engage the world of nature." But he uses it not as a way to understand the material side of human affairs, but as a comprehensive principle that explains the "strategic relationships that shape the terms under which human lives are conducted."

One result is that anyone without a fairly good knowledge of world history will surely feel quite lost. There are no references to any of the political, cultural, and diplomatic events that form the framework within which all the activity described by Wolf took place. More important, Wolf's disregard of this framework makes his explanation of even merely economic facts and factors curiously vague. For example, in the chapter on "Europe: Prelude to Expansion," we read that the overseas discoveries were connected somehow to the crises of the Late Middle Ages, but no attempt is made to give any actual reasons why Portugal, of all places, began them. Similarly, Spain "achieved political unity." Yes, but who did the achieving, and how, and why? Surely "unity" did not mysteriously appear from on high, like the "national spirit" of those older historical accounts that Wolf despises? Personal names, except for those of certain scholars and that of Marx, are almost wholly absent from the body of the text, leaving the reader with the impression that Wolf believes that the actors of history are precisely those impersonal forces whose reification he so deplores in his opening sentence. Thus, "the quest for American silver, the fur trade, the trade in slaves, and the search for Asian spices drew people into new and unforeseen interdependencies and profoundly changed their lives." I should have thought, rather, that individuals such as Machiavelli, the theorist of modern politics, Richelieu, the architect of the *ancien régime* and the balance of power, Frederick the Great, the personification of the bureaucratic ethic of duty, or Jefferson, the philosopher of liberty and revolution, had more to do with drawing people into "new and unforeseen interdependencies" and "profoundly changing their lives" in Europe and elsewhere than anonymous impulses to trade and the search for gold in the Indies.

The problems get worse as we approach the modern world. The answer to the question of why capitalist methods of production and exchange arose first of all in England is reduced to the existence of "'free' labor." Instead of asking what the cultural origins of free labor might have been, as Alan Macfarlane has recently done in *The Origins of English Individualism* (1978), Wolf quickly drops the notion and goes on to a lengthy disquisition on the finer points of contemporary Marxist theology concerning "the source of capitalism's tendency to drive incessantly beyond its own frontiers." We learn here, once again, that "the capitalist state exists to ensure the domination of one class over another," and, amazingly, that the American Civil War was fought, not over

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the issue of slavery or even of states' rights, but over "the issue of who was to dominate the state," Northern industrialists or Southern cotton growers.

Given this cardboard view of the modern world, it is not surprising that Wolf wholeheartedly subscribes to the vulgar Marxist view of the twentieth century, according to which, for example, "World War II and the technological revolution afterward rescued the [capitalist] system from depression and set a new phase of expansion in the rate of profit." In other words, Hitler had nothing to do with it; he was simply a tool of the economic cycle. This incredibly simplistic view not only perversely excuses all dictatorships and totalitarian movements either by ignoring them or by declaring them to be epiphenomena of economic change, but also makes wars, conflicts, and the development of political institutions and systems appear as so many ***dei ex machina,*** without apparent origin, reason, or function. Wolf claims to be concerned with all levels of life, material production, social change, and political transformation, but the sphere of the political, without which the economic account has no meaning, is wholly excluded.

As Wolf nears the end of his account, he asserts that "this book has asked what difference it would make to our understanding if we looked at the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures." He goes on to reformulate the liberal-seeming methodological credo with which he began:

> (. . .) we can no longer think of societies as isolated and self-maintaining systems. Nor can we imagine cultures as integrated totalities in which each part contributes to the maintenance of an organized, autonomous, and enduring whole. There are only cultural sets of practices and ideas, put into play by determinate human actors under determinate circumstances. In the course of action, these cultural sets are forever assembled, dismantled, and reassembled, conveying in variable accents the divergent paths of groups and classes. *These paths do not find their explanation in the self-interested decisions of interacting individuals.* They grow out of the deployment of social labor, mobilized to engage the world of nature. The manner of that mobilization sets the terms of history, and in these terms the peoples who have asserted a privileged relation with history and the peoples to whom history has been denied encounter a common destiny. [Emphasis added.]

In this final paragraph, the orthodox Marxist elements of Wolf's creed emerge clearly. The reification of "history" as a metaphysical entity, and the assertion that it appears in the world as "the mobilization of social labor to engage the world of nature," are fresh from the notebooks of 1844 and the *Critique of Political Economy.*

Is this, then, an honest work of Marxist exegesis, no more problematic than the ever-popular ramblings of Baran, Sweezy, Mandel, and others whom Wolf quotes with approval? In principle, yes, although the declining ability of readers to judge such texts on the basis of general practical and theoretical knowledge means that theory will too easily be taken for fact and that the narrow criteria of relevance will not be noticed for what they are. More important, however, is the fact that Wolf's work, despite its title and claims, is not a work of history. For all its wealth of detail, it tells us nothing of substance concerning the historical development of Europe or of anywhere else.

In one of his rare public excursions into general theory, Geoffrey Elton, who has probably educated more good historians than anyone else in the English-speaking world, writes:

> The social scientists who seek to discover the true structure of society rapidly transform an instrument of research into a norm for the society studied; what is thought to be the reality of social relationships discovered by enquiry becomes reality by being imposed (with the authority of science) upon those relation-

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> ships . . . . It is here that the historian's proper function and true service enter . . . . Our peculiar method of working, which renders us incapable of seeking "maturity" in the production of a universal law or system, enables us, and our social duty obliges us, to subject the paradigmatic structures of others to criticism and if necessary to demolition by applying our own unhindered, unauthoritative, pragmatic and sometimes simplistic doubts to their claims to authority—especially when that authority moves from intellectual concerns (where, after all, it constrains only other practitioners of the same discipline) to political, where it constrains us all.[3]

The "new social history" or "historical social science" violates these principles on all counts. Since Wallerstein, Wolf, and their ilk deal primarily in secondary sources, they are unable to apply the basic practices of historical method: to define an area of study, to examine with a fully open mind as much as possible of the primary evidence, and to "learn the particular questions" to be pursued. They restrict their focus to the economic questions of production, distribution, and exchange, and they import "capitalism" as a general criterion of relevance and as a principle of explanation. Their interest in the institutions, practices, and political events of individual, concrete societies and periods is either marginal or nonexistent. No wonder that the results are physically voluminous but intellectually meager.

No doubt the older diplomatic and political history was in need of some renewal, but there are other ways of going about it. Only a few feet from where I write, two outstanding historians, Gordon Craig and Gordon Wright, have been producing masterly accounts of the modern history of Germany and France that are widely recognized, in those countries themselves, as not only fully adequate to the contemporary interest in social and economic developments but worthy of comparison with the best classical accounts in breadth of scope as well as in matters of style. Such men have not forgotten that history is more than just a "social science" and that the writing of it is an art irreducible to any other. Furthermore, they realize that since all historical knowledge begins with the concrete, the individual event, it is only by reviving and maintaining the Western tradition of political, institutional, and intellectual history that the basic familiarity with the history of one's own country and culture can be maintained. Without that familiarity, abstract presentations of global developments are meaningless or, at worst, productive of gross misunderstandings and misperceptions.

The ascendancy of the ahistorical method —Marxist, structuralist, or otherwise— poses a special danger to the historical profession. With the closing off of the ranks of the profession to new recruits from below due to hiring freezes, whatever new blood survives is likely to favor not political, institutional, and intellectual history, but the anthropological or sociological nonhistory exemplified by Wolf, for which the most important skill is a large capacity for abstract theorizing. The general familiarity with the course of Western history which was still—barely—provided in my high-school days fifteen years ago is no longer easily available at the early level where it is most needed. Restoring that base requires new general accounts of the political, cultural, and intellectual history of the Middle Ages and of modern Europe. Only these will provide the historical framework for a true understanding of such global processes as Wolf describes. Restoring the base also requires that at least some of the junior recruits to the profession pursue what one may call traditional history. Such works and such research will not be forthcoming, however, if those who might join ranks are told that the history of modern Europe is of no particular interest and relevance, and that its study need not be carried out with the classical methods of the historian's craft.

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3 Geoffrey R. Elton, "The Historian's Social Function," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Vol. 27, 1977

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Is life worth living?

Jacques Barzun A Stroll with William James. Harper & Row, 344 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Roger Kimball

Readers who accompany Jacques Barzun on his stroll with William James will find much to admire. The pace is leisurely—this is a stroll, not a scholarly expedition—but the route, if predictable, is well-planned and full of interesting stops. Barzun is an eloquent companion, and his intimate knowledge of the terrain makes him a capable guide for those less than familiar with its contours. He leads one through the landmarks of James's career (appropriately, *The Principles of Psychology* and James's work in pragmatism get top billing), pausing frequently to recall some pertinent influence or anecdote, or to point out the rich legacy that James's ideas have bequeathed.

Describing the book as "the record of an intellectual debt," Barzun hails James as "the most inclusive mind I can listen to," and it soon becomes clear that in paying tribute to James he is at the same time detailing what was evidently the single most formative influence on his own intellectual development. For those less smitten with James, Barzun's enthusiasm for him may at times seem extravagant, as when he places James alongside Einstein or Beethoven as a genius of the first rank, or notes, in his appreciation of James's merits as a stylist, that "it comes as no surprise that Graham Wallas thought James could have been a great poet." Barzun's James emerges as a kind of American Goethe, endowed with all manner of virtues. Still, at a time when it is *de rigueur* to be anxious about influence and obsessed with originality, it is refreshing to find such frank acknowledgment of one's teachers and to see influence regarded, as it traditionally has been, as an enabling rather than a crippling force.

In part an intellectual biography, in part a commentary on James's major writings, *A Stroll with William James* is perhaps best described as a portrait of a sensibility. In proper Jamesian fashion, Barzun never loses sight of the man behind the work. He introduces us to *The Principles of Psychology, Pragmatism,* "The Will to Believe," and *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* but throughout he seems more interested in revealing the style or animating habits of James's thought than in subjecting it to detailed analysis.

The book opens in 1890 with the forty-eight-year-old James ensconced at Harvard, teaching, making friendly visits to sick students, awaiting publication of *The Principles of Psychology.* Barzun gives a brief overview of James's development, paying due attention to the importance of his unusual family and upbringing, and rightly underscores James's "phenomenological" cast of mind, his instinct for the particular. "No one," the young James writes in a letter, "sees farther into a generalization than his own knowledge of details extends."

For James, this instinct was to become a methodological imperative. If traditionally philosophy had denigrated feeling and the sensible as "mere appearance," James, like Nietzsche, attempted to restore them to a place of philosophic respectability. By championing the richness and particularity of experience against the encroachments of abstraction, he hoped to provide an antidote to unanchored theory. No longer was "the real" first and foremost what cognition or logic mandates but what we feel, what impinges on us. Barzun celebrates "the Jamesian truth that reality overflows all attempts to capture and bottle it." One might object that, as expressed here, this truth is no more peculiar to James than to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or many other thinkers. But the point is well taken. After all, asks Barzun, "who could define and measure a degree of hate, a sphere of influence, a volt of sexual attraction? The things are patently real, but they shift, mingle, vanish, and return in a way we can understand but not compute." It follows that mood, temperament, and one's pre-reflective con-

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victions about what matters are not philosophically irrelevant accidents of one's situation or personality but, on the contrary, the basic constituents of philosophic exchange.

This commitment to experience *as* experienced marks one of the most telling and attractive features of James's thought. It stands behind his suspicion of rationalism and philosophical system-building, and, by emphasizing the textured complexity of experience, it encourages intellectual modesty. "I am no lover of disorder," James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* "but fear to lose truth by the pretension to possess it wholly." It also helps explain his fascination with spiritualism, psychic phenomena, and altered states of consciousness. For who could say what truths they might reveal? James remained wary, but his dogmatically anti-dogmatic approach made him reluctant to brand any mode of experience inherently spurious. As Barzun notes, James's radical openness to experience deliberately blurs the distinction between appearance and reality and thus "puts ideas, feelings, sensations, perceptions, concepts, art, science, faith, conscious, unconscious, objects, and so-called illusions on a footing of equality as regards being real." It is this side of James's thought that gives weight to Elizabeth Hardwick's description of James as "a sort of Californian." His sympathy for the exotic restrained him from making "value judgments" even where he suspected fraudulence.

James's sensitivity to the particulars of experience is inseparable from the decidedly existential character of his work. This finds expression in his emphasis on the importance of risk and choice in essays like "The Will to Believe" and "Is Life Worth Living?" and, more generally, in his view of philosophy as essentially a non-technical, practical matter that addresses the question, "How should I live my life?" For James, traditional philosophy, obsessed with epistemology and speculative metaphysics, has lost its way. "The whole function of philosophy," he declares in *Pragmatism,* "ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of

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our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one." Thus, according to James, the great virtue of pragmatism is that it dissolves metaphysical stalemates ("Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?") by concentrating on the practical instead of the speculative consequences of our ideas. "The pragmatic method," he writes,

> is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that might otherwise be interminable . . . . What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.

In this sense, pragmatism's chief attraction is that it "'unstiffens' our theories." It is more a method than a doctrine, and as such, James tells us, it "has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canon of what shall count as truth."

Be that as it may, even pragmatism must provide some account of truth. It is not surprising that James proposes a practical rather than an intellectual account. For him, truth is first of all not the correspondence of knowledge with its object, as Kant would have it, but what *works*. "Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural . . . having only this quality in common, that they *pay*." Hence, James does not worry about segregating the true from the good or the useful. "'The true,'" he writes in an oft-quoted passage from *Pragmatism*, "is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as 'the right' is the expedient in our way of acting."

Here again James reminds us of Nietzsche. "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species could not live," Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*. "The value for *life* is ultimately decisive." But James is more radical than Nietzsche in the sense that his conception of truth does not play off the traditional notion of truth as correspondence. Only this provides the contrast that

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justifies Nietzsche's frequent description of truth as a species of "lie" or as "error." James would question such talk precisely because his conception of truth does not imply the foil of an ideal standard against which our truths can be measured and found wanting.

On this point, James has not lacked critics. Thinkers as different as Russell and Dewey (who himself advocated a pragmatic conception of truth) have charged that his identification of truth with what works is unworkable. Exactly what, Dewey wondered, does pragmatism mean by "practical"? "For myself," he wrote in his review of *Pragmatism,* "I have no hesitation in saying that it seems unpragmatic for pragmatism to content itself with finding out the value of a conception whose own inherent significance pragmatism has not first determined."

"Inherent significance" is just what James denies. This means that he cannot in principle distinguish between statements of the form "It is true that . . ." and "It is useful that . . . ." But it is clearly one thing to say "It is true that the guerrilla activity in El Salvador is part of a Soviet conspiracy" and quite another to say "It is useful to believe that the guerrilla activity in El Salvador is part of a Soviet conspiracy." Further, it may well be the case that in making expediency the measure of truth, James has created more problems than he has solved. In what sense expedient? Expedient for whom? How do we tell if a given conception "works," if it "pays," if it has "cash value"? The answer to these questions is not as simple or straightforward as Barzun—or James—suggests.

In general, I think it must be said that in his efforts to return philosophy to experience, James overshot the mark. For example, we may want to agree that "purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found." Yet this is not to say, with James, that such purely objective truth cannot become a regulative ideal that guides inquiry. Indeed, without such an ideal it is impossible to do justice to what we ordinarily mean by truth. Or again, we may want to applaud James's insistence on the importance of temperament and mood in philosophy. Such things undoubtedly color the way we see the world. But this does not mean that philosophy is *imprisoned* by temperament or disposition. At times, James implies this, as when (in "The Sentiment of Rationality") he identifies rationality with "certain subjective marks" and concludes that when one "has got the marks" one "has got the rationality." Here, as elsewhere in James, psychology threatens to triumph over philosophy. In denying the transpersonal character of truth, James does not liberate truth, he elides it.

Still, in one or another of its versions pragmatism has proven a powerful ally in contemporary philosophy's search for new points of departure. Because of its critique of rationalist epistemology and emphasis on lived experience, pragmatism offers an alternative to traditional philosophy's overly intellectualistic conception of man. Thus, in his recently translated study of Charles Peirce (who, incidentally, coined the term "pragmatism" but later repudiated it because he felt that James had emptied it of critical content), Karl-Otto Apel enlists pragmatism in the attempt to overcome "the 'methodological solipsism' that begins by assuming the autarchy of the knowing subject." Apel's book is especially interesting because it champions a pragmatic conception of truth without falling prey to psychologism or losing critical intensity.

More radical are Richard Rorty's recent excursions in pragmatism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Consequences of Pragmatism.* Dreaming of a "philosophy without epistemology," Rorty distinguishes between Philosophy with a capital "P," which continues to labor under the shadow of the Platonic inheritance, and "an edifying philosophy that aims at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering a truth." Pragmatism, having cheerfully abandoned

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traditional epistemological aspirations, is well-equipped to realize this triumph of philosophy over Philosophy and inaugurate "a post-Philosophical culture . . . in which men and women [would feel] themselves alone, finite, with no links to something Beyond."

Like James, Rorty wants to dispense with the cumbersome distinction between appearance and reality in order to short-circuit any attempt to formulate a distinction between "mere opinion and genuine knowledge." From this it follows that there cannot in principle be any essential distinction among orders of discourse: physics is no more objective than poetry, philosophy no less fanciful than literature. "The pragmatist," Rorty explains, "drops the notion of truth as correspondence with reality altogether, and says modern science does not enable us to cope because it corresponds, it just plain enables us to cope." Hence "the question of what 'X' refers to is a sociological matter."

The crucial issue, as Rorty recognizes, is whether we can make sense of any extra-linguistic access to reality, whether the limits of our language mark the limits of our world. "Here we hit a bedrock metaphilosophical issue," Rorty says in *Consequences of Pragmatism.* "Can one ever appeal to nonlinguistic knowledge in philosophical argument?" With some notable exceptions, traditional philosophy has tended to answer "yes." It was to such nonlinguistic knowledge that Plato, for example, appealed with his doctrine of recollection. But if we insist on "the ubiquity of language," then we remain trapped in our various language games and Rorty's version of pragmatism has the last word. If language has no "outside," in Derrida's phrase, then it is pointless to seek to go beyond it. In this sense, however, Barzun's James would seem to be a very poor pragmatist. For him, pragmatism, far from reinforcing our bondage to language, endeavored to dissolve it. It may be that neither Barzun nor James realized the radical implications of some of James's pronouncements on truth. Rorty has done much to bring them to our attention. Yet Barzun's James and Rorty's James, though they use the same words, speak very different languages. The one looks to pragmatism for the fulfillment of philosophy, the other for its supersession. But both, perhaps, illustrate the dangers that attend pragmatism's success.

Pursuing the marginal

Denis Dutton, editor The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art. University of California Press, 276 pages, $22.50

reviewed by E. V. Thaw

"I heard an imitation of Caruso and he's rotten."
—old vaudeville joke

The essays collected in *The Forger's Art* address each other in the manner of an academic conference or symposium. Indeed, since most are written in academic jargon instead of English, they are more properly called "papers" instead of essays. The contributors are all professors, and, with one exception, they share the belief, treated throughout as an assumption, that there is a "problem of forgery" in the complex relationship we have with works of art; that, furthermore, the problem is central to our understanding of art itself. "The initial spark for 'The Forger's Art,'" writes Denis Dutton in his preface to the book, "came from students in my aesthetics classes persistently demanding to know why forged paintings must be considered inferior to originals, when 'nobody can tell the difference.'" It is comforting to know that intellectual curiosity is not absent from university aesthetics classes these days, but it is appalling to see that a whole philosophical industry has sprung up around a non-issue like forgery.

The foundation for much of the argument in the book is the essay by Nelson Goodman, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Harvard. In "Art and Authenticity" Goodman makes a distinction between auto-

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graphic and allographic works of art—or between works that are made by the hand of the artist, like paintings, and those that can be transmitted by notation, like music, literature, and dance (to some extent). Goodman claims that, as long as the correct text is used, there can be no forgery in allographic arts. In autographic arts there *can* be forgery, he says, but our experience of even the "exact" copy will differ from our experience of the original. Goodman argues that if you cannot see the difference between an "exact" Rembrandt copy and the original and yet you know which the genuine Rembrandt is by provenance, then you will have a different aesthetic reaction to the paintings because you will expect to be able to see the difference between them in the future even if you cannot at the present. Goodman seems to be saying that our inability to see the difference between a real Rembrandt and a false one doesn't mean that a difference doesn't exist or that someone properly gifted or trained cannot see it. He implies, although not strongly enough, that the crucial difference between the real and the false is sometimes very subtle. That is why perfectly genuine paintings that have been cleaned or restored insensitively lose a measure of authenticity, although they remain genuine in the larger sense.

The symposiasts challenge Goodman but gain no ground in understanding along the way. His distinction between autographic and allographic works is attacked by various talmudic inventions of special cases: tampering with tapes, for example, or interposing an autograph with a printed score. Here is Mark Sagoff, a professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, killing a flea with a cannon:

> At the risk of being tedious, perhaps it is well to point out that there is a weak sense in which originals and forgeries can have some of the same aesthetic qualities even if these are relational. Let us say that an original painting, for example, Van Gogh's "Night Café," is very skillful for a painting by Van Gogh—it shows a full mastery of the various techniques, etc., which that artist developed. Thus this sentence is true:
>
> > Skillful (Night Café), $\hat{y}$ (paintings by Van Gogh) & Night Café e $\hat{y}$ (paintings by Van Gogh)
>
> There may be a forgery of "Night Café" which is very skillful for a forgery; it shows a full mastery of the various techniques which go into forging. The following sentence, then, is also true:
>
> > Skillful (the forgery), $\hat{y}$ (forgeries) & the e $\hat{y}$ (forgeries).
>
> Well, as you can see both the original and the forgery are correctly described as "skillful," though not in relation to the same reference class. They will have the "same" aesthetic quality, then, in that very weak sense.

All the symposiasts take pains to show what afficionados they are of painting, poetry, music, and ballet, dropping names from Warhol to Cherubini and making long discursive comparisons of the different arts in relation to the "problem of forgery."

The famous case of Han van Meegeren's forgeries of Vermeer is cited repeatedly by the philosophers; it is thoroughly summarized by Hope B. Werness in the book's first chapter. In spite of skepticism that was more widespread at the time than this book acknowledges, the forgeries were "discovered" only when van Meegeren himself, in order to avoid being prosecuted for collaboration with the Nazis after World War II, confessed to having painted them. The case seems to raise the question of whether the forgeries were as "aesthetically valuable" as real Vermeers since some critics accepted their authenticity at the time. Incredibly, Jack W. Meiland, Alfred Lessing, and Monroe Beardsley all argue that there is no aesthetic difference between original paintings and clever forgeries like van Meegeren's.

The last essay in the book is by Francis Sparshott, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto and president of the

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American Society for Aesthetics. He compares forgery to the betrayal of true love and says that asking "'What is wrong with forgery?' is like asking 'What is wrong with free sex?'" He tells us some dirty stories, advises us to buy only from artists we know well, in order to avoid fakes. (He himself collects Eskimo art.) In the last paragraph of the book he claims that an attitude that emphasizes the internal beauty of art increases our exposure to possible forgery and to disillusionment with art itself. Thus, we have Dadaism and anti-art, and "we are living out a dirty joke."

What is behind this babble of aesthetics, this ferment on campus about forgery? The self-congratulatory tone in these essays is one clue. Many of the participants seem to feel they have scored a triumph over "empiricists" by merely identifying forgery as a central problem in aesthetics. The empirical approach is a sort of "art for art's sake" or New Critical approach, in which the work of art is meant to contain in itself all that we need to know about it. Forgeries, it is claimed, can be identified only by our knowing things outside the visual data of the painting itself; ergo, "empiricism" in art criticism is defeated. Poor Clive Bell, whose efforts were directed at getting Englishmen to try to look carefully at the magnificent examples of modern art available to them, is cited here as the most extreme aesthetic empiricist: hence, a villain.

Of course, when it comes to looking at a work of visual art none of us is a perfect instrument. Some have a better "eye," some better training and experience. Since art is so vast, no one is universally competent. But it is simply not true that fakes and forgeries are the kind of problem that this book makes them out to be. Forgery certainly exists and it occasionally provokes some interesting problems, but it is decidedly marginal to the vast body of art itself. Making it central to our understanding of the creative act is merely playing a tricky intellectual game.

Fakes are prevalent, to be sure, but expertise is too, and very few fakes penetrate the defenses. Those that do are usually of two kinds. They are imitations of works of art so minor and marginal (scrappy Picasso ephemera, Dufy, Laurencin, or Chagall pastiches) that they sneak by the normal guardians of authenticity, or else they are major attempts at deception, like van Meegeren's Vermeers. Forgeries of this kind are carefully directed toward buyers whose defenses are down and whose desire for a coup clouds their judgment just long enough for the deception to succeed. The Boston Museum's Raphael and the Cleveland Museum's Grünewald were episodes of this sort. Neither lasted very long and neither distorted art history in any way. Both were identified as wrong by "eye" before other proofs were adduced.

Our philosophers have gone wrong in making forgery a central problem of art because they do not seem to understand the common-sense distinction between a thing and its imitation. There will always be imitations of a "hot number," whether it's by Judy Garland or by Picasso. In the case of a Judy Garland impersonation, most of us know the common language of performance and are able to distinguish the parody from the original. In the case of a Picasso impersonation, not everyone is so well equipped—certainly not most of the academics who have contributed to *The Forger's Art.* They seem to feel cheated by forgery of being able to understand art as a human endeavor. By their giving forgery a central position, their experience of art hovers around a mystery they cannot penetrate. Moreover, they pretend that no one else can.

One does not know whether to be upset or amused by the intellectual hijinks of some of the contributors. Jack Meiland, for example, discussing copies by Delacroix of earlier artists, writes:

> It is instructive to vary this slightly by having Delacroix make, not an exact copy of, say, a Titian, but instead a copy that intentionally contains a small change, resulting in a better expression of Titian's vision. We do not have anything as serious and imposing as a new

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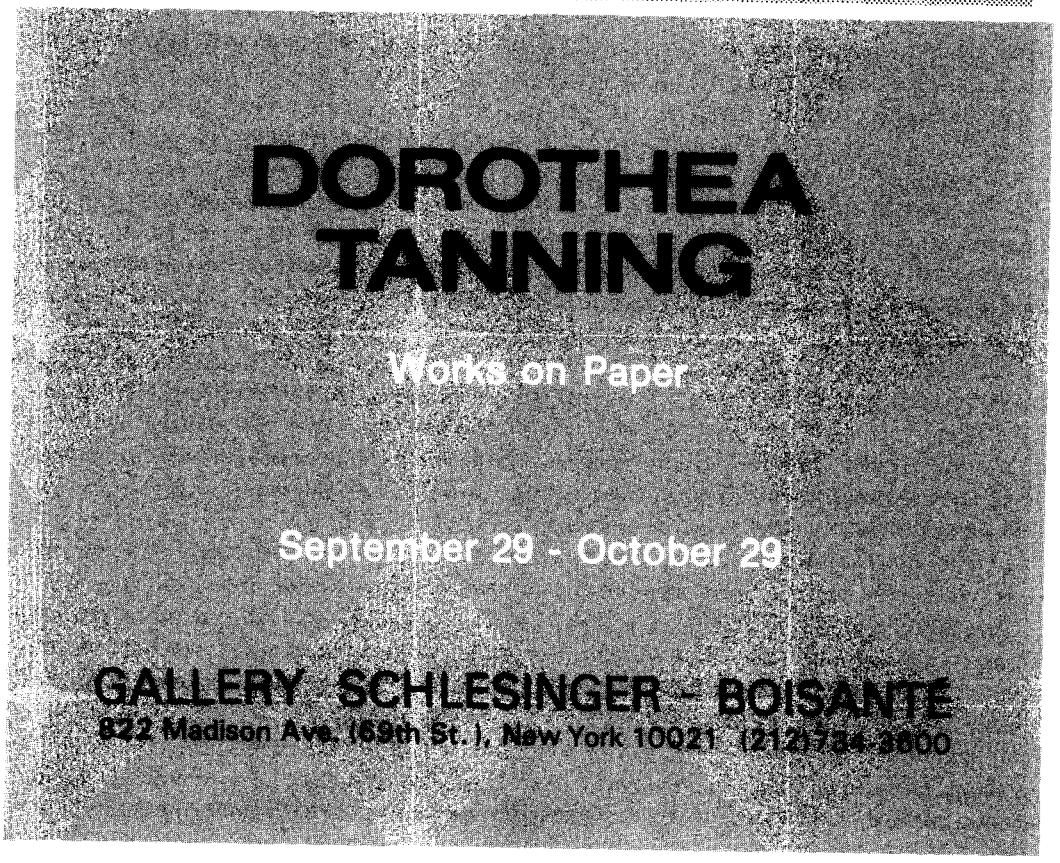
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> vision of the world as a result of Delacroix's change, only a small improvement in the old vision. Now, would you rather have Titian's original or Delacroix's almost-exact-but-slightly-improved copy? We might compare this situation with one in which you have your choice between one of Alexander Graham Bell's first telephones and a modern instrument. The improved version of the telephone is not original in the sense of being the first of its kind, and it is better than the original.

An anti-elitist political position combined with a fundamentally philistine sensibility often seems to lurk beneath the surface of these essays. The consequences of such a combination would be laughable were they not also dangerous. Only last year Edward Banfield, a professor of sociology at Harvard, argued at some length in *Harper's* magazine that America's regional museums should cease trying to buy original works of art. They should exhibit instead good reproductions of acknowledged masterpieces in order to provide the public with a superior "aesthetic" experience. The title of the piece was eloquently exact: "Let Them See Fakes: A Better Way to Bring Art to the People."

The Forger's Art does include one essay that does not share the misconceptions at the core of the rest of the book. It is by Rudolph Arnheim, professor emeritus of the psychology of art at Harvard. His essay, "On Duplication," is a model of clarity and good sense. It begins like this:

> We are afflicted not only with too many forgeries but also perhaps with too many disquisitions about forgery—too many because the same arguments keep turning up and the same examples are being cited again and again. The subject begins to look like one of those scenic spots of nature where too many vacationers have had a picnic. Is yet another attempt at interpretation really justified?

Arnheim goes on to give a lucid account of the complexity of the elements that constitute a work of art. He confirms that its "properties reside in all its various embodiments": the idea in the artist's head, the sketch, the finished painting or sculpture. Regarding our perception of art, however, he states: "It is always a search for structure because only structured form can be perceived." A nod to Clive Bell and the so-called empiricists, *pace* the philosophers.

Arnheim reminds us that forgeries must always reveal their own time. We look at art differently than we once did and in the future we will look at it differently than we do now. That alone is a built-in historical corrective to the problem of forgeries.

While most of the essayists in *The Forger's Art* are stuck at the "exact copy" paradox, a few properly point out that much connoisseurship of older art is concerned with attribution, which is a very different matter from forgery. Scholarship in the history of art is a continuous process: mistakes will be made by good authorities with the best of intentions. Once again, it is Arnheim who alone in this book states the reasonable case for a discipline always refining its search for the truth:

> Practical indications can make it quite certain that a particular painting was done by Rembrandt; but such a proof, based on documentation, may not require any knowledge of Rembrandt's art whatever. It can be obtained by a detective or a lawyer. The art historian's true challenge consists in coming to know the characteristics of Rembrandt's art to such an extent that it can be distinguished with certainty from the works of others. This task, however, is necessarily endless; and by no means does the endlessness of the search imply that the final truth does not exist.

Arnheim is also alone in this book in frankly stating a fact the other contributors to *The Forger's Art* do so well to demonstrate: "In philosophical aesthetics, tedious pseudo-problems have been introduced by dichotomous thinking."

For those who have learned to read the language of art, the experience of original works is one of the greatest pleasures of civ-

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ilized life. Of course, we should learn as much as we can—historically, biographically, technically, critically—about the art we wish to know well, the better to understand the nature of the experience. On rare occasion, a forgery, like those the newspaper supplements delight in—a van Meegeren, for example—will create a brief sensation and the cry will go up that experts are fools and art itself suspect. One is prepared for this in popular journalism, but one cannot but be annoyed to find such an attitude informing the deliberations of our contemporary philosophers.

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Fiction chronicle

How he saved himself

by Erich Eichman

The scenes in C. D. B. Bryan's *Beautiful Women; Ugly Scenes*[1] are indeed ugly. They are filled with bitter, captious, vengeful people willing to ruin other people's lives for the sake of their own happiness, or for sex (which is often the same thing). But the scenes are ugly in another way as well, because they are really little seminars in the education of the narrator (who, incidentally, is unnamed). He clearly relishes reciting every tawdry detail and lingering over the lessons he has learned from so much human misery. Bryan does not trick him out with an agonized conscience, thank goodness, but there is still something ugly about his mediocre mind sifting serenely through the wreckage of so much psychological violence—for which he is much responsible—only to end up with a few battered clichés, and not very good ones at that.

The narrator describes in numbing detail his two marriages, two divorces, two affairs, two houses, and (one) soul-saving relationship. He attempts to sort out his true, honest feelings about women along the way, but he can't do that until he understands himself, so there's a lot on his mind. His mind, unfortunately, is not up to it. It tends toward trite abstraction and the generalizing shorthand of pop psychology so poignant on those Hallmark "apology" cards: "Somewhere along the line," he says, "we forgot how to be friends. We forgot how to have fun together, to play, to make the effort, to care. We forgot to encourage and compliment each other, to flirt, to surprise, to gift." Is "gift" the right word here? I wonder. "I needed someone or something solidly rooted to cling to," he says at another point. "Someone or something safe and familiar to deflect the unrelenting anxiety I felt." But: "When I tried to speak with Alice about my anxiety, she did not want to hear." Little wonder! Alice, his second wife, will eventually have an affair with Arthur, his friend and neighbor. Luckily, *Arthur's* wife is one of those beautiful, honest, knowing (and yet somehow *vulnerable*) characters who are likely to show up in novels of this sort. She is filled with "resentment and rage," of course, but also "with love and thoughtfulness, tenderness, and laughter." Most of all, she is "wise. She has a ruthless intelligence which pierces through all the presumptions, excuses, rationalizations"—and so on. So he has an affair with her. ("We let each other *be*.") There is symmetry in this.

The narrator and his friends do a lot of talking when they are not doing something else and Bryan has an ear for what people sound like when they can't stand each other anymore. Here is an exchange, conducted before friends, on the parceling out of domestic chores:

> "We may not do the same jobs," I said, "but we share the load."

1 *Beautiful Women; Ugly Scenes,* by C. D. B. Bryan. Doubleday, 374 pages, $16.95

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"I cook, he eats," Alice said.

"That's not fair, Alice!" I protested.

"You're right. It isn't," she said.

"You make dinners. I make breakfast and lunches," I said.

"I don't eat breakfast or lunch," Alice said.

"The children do," I said.

"But you get up with them," Alice said. "Why shouldn't you make their breakfasts? They're your children, too."

"I know, I know," I said. "I don't mind doing it. I only—"

"Why should you *mind* doing it?" Alice demanded.

Clearly there is something wrong between these two. "Problems occur in a marriage when a couple begins keeping score," the narrator says, in a rare moment of lucidity. And the couples in *Beautiful Women; Ugly Scenes* keep score like mad. Who does what around the house and is it fair? is a big question, but there are others. Perhaps the most important is: How many times and with whom? Indeed, a good part of Bryan's limited talent is spent describing the female anatomy at precarious moments—and all in a hack pornographic style that lapses into wave imagery whenever the moment calls for a "lyrical" touch.

What little talent Bryan has left is devoted to the narrator's finding out (in his own words) what being a man really *means*. Somehow, with all the wandering his libido has been doing, you wouldn't think the question would be that hard to answer. But there are, supposedly, bigger issues at stake, and here is where Bryan shows himself to be no wiser than his characters. Deadpan, he gives his hero earnest thoughts about the fragility of the male ego ("I was wrong to be so angry") and feeds him lines on the need to care and share and *feel* that would make the most avid group-therapy counselor cringe. It is all meant to signify some progress toward sensitivity, but it only shows that the opportunities for honesty are many when the need for self-abasement is great.

To all those ideologically grounded complaints Alice was so fond of—ideology can be such a handy cudgel in domestic warfare these days!—Bryan is happy to assign moral weight. It makes all that scorekeeping profound instead of trivial. What is infidelity, after all, but a statement about the division of kitchen chores? And so, amidst shameless betrayals and bitter custody fights, the narrator learns about cooking and caring and cleaning up after dinner, from the woman—the wise one—he leaves his second wife for (or the woman whose husband his wife leaves *him* for):

> I would tell Odette that I believed in equality between the sexes and yet I let her do all the cooking and cleaning, the "woman's work." I was not even good company. I was constantly talking about my problems and worries, myself . . . . I would come down from the cottage, build a fire, mix her a drink, sit and chat with her while she cooked. Oh, I would do the dishes (rinse and stack them in the dishwasher), but I'd leave the pans to soak.

Imagine leaving the pans to soak! But he learns. Oh, how he learns. From Odette he learns what women "share" with each other when they are alone. He learns that "When men are being tender, they think they are being less of a man. Women think the opposite. We think he is more of a man." He discovers that Odette is "her own woman, in control of her life and free." (Enlightenment can begin to sound like condescension, can't it?) And he learns how to cook dinner.

It is often easy to forget—so marginal is their existence here—but there are children in this novel worth having a conscience over, if anybody cares to. Our hero occasionally does. "I worry about Peter, too," he confesses at one critical moment. Peter is his confused young son, who moves in from the margin toward the end of the novel to deliver those poignant "Daddy, are you and Mommy getting a divorce?" questions that inevitably crop up in situations like this. "How is he going to learn about love if all he sees is Alice and me?" the narrator asks. That's a good question: you wish Alice and

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he had thought about it themselves some time before. He'll learn on his own, Odette responds, like we all did. (That's not a good answer.) "You have two children also," he says to her, obviously worried about the effect all this reshuffling will have on them. "They're strong. They'd survive," she says.

This is the hardest lesson for our hero to learn, but he masters it manfully. When Joanie, his daughter-from-the-first-marriage, expresses some confusion over Dad's newest liaison, he is inspired to make a speech. It does everything to confirm the banality of the sentiments at work in this novel, and the ruthless selfishness that lies behind the simplest cliché:

> I talk so much with Odette because we have to build *our* relationship, work hard on staying together because in not too many more years you and all the other children are going to want to leave home. You're all going to want to lead your own lives. And once you leave Odette and I will only have each other. I'm not going to spend all these years with Odette raising you only to find that she and I are strangers to each other when you're gone.

This is really too much. Good old philandering Dad is living with his second woman after Mom and look who's being selfish: fourteen-year-old Joanie. She's the one who kicked up such a fuss earlier in the novel about being shuttled between homes and schools and parents while she was growing up.

But that is perfectly in keeping with the character of *Beautiful Women; Ugly Scenes.* So much amateur psychology is put in the service of so many trashy sentiments, and for people so self-absorbed that they cannot see that at times there is more at stake in life—in family life especially—than answering the question "How happy will this make me?" Or rather they see that there is more at stake, and they insist on carrying on anyway. It's selfishness justified by theory, and it really is ugly—a lot uglier than Bryan himself seems to realize.

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Notebook

Annals of the Polish avant-garde

by Ewa Kuryluk

The exhibition called *Présences Polonaises,* which was on view in Paris this summer, came as a salutary reminder of the Polish avant-garde.[1] The exhibition was intended as a survey of Polish culture from the end of the First World War to the present day, and it included not only paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture, but also examples from Polish architecture, photography, literature, theater, film, and music. Among other things, it reflected how closely the lives of artists in this part of the world have been tied to politics.

The first section of the exhibition recreated the multinational and multireligious Poland that was erased from the map by the Second World War. The second section attempted to show what is going on artistically in Poland today. Whatever the success of the exhibition, there was some reward in simply seeing gathered together in one show the living and the dead—the Poles, the Russians, and the Jews whose contributions have been so important to the culture of Eastern Europe in this century. And there was some surprise in seeing the Polish authorities allow—at least in the historical section of the exhibition—the showing of art irrespective of an artist's place of residence or political standing.

1 *Présences Polonaises,* Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, June 23 through September 26. The exhibition was organized in cooperation with the Museum of Modern Art in Lodz, Poland.

The first part of the historical section of the Paris exhibition was given over to the work of Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz—or "Witkacy," as he called himself. One of the most impressive items was a small photograph showing five men seated around a table. Only on closer inspection does one see that it is only one person—represented from different sides. Taken with the help of mirrors, the photograph is a multiple self-portrait of Witkacy. It shows a good-looking young man in uniform and cap and it registers the fact that, as a Russian subject in a nonexistent Poland, Witkacy had to serve in the Tsarist Army. He was in fact a lieutenant in the First World War; and he was decorated for his valor in the battle of Vitomir. After his return to St. Petersburg, he witnessed the October Revolution of 1917. This he was later to regard as the most shattering experience of his life.

Witkacy was the most brilliant and controversial personality of Polish culture between the wars. He was Andy Warhol, Bob Wilson, and Paul Feyerabend all in one, his activity stretching from the visual arts (both "pure" and "commercial") to literature, theater, philosophy, and anthropology. In his way of life, he combined the *à rebours* tradition of West European decadents with Dadaistic craziness. Decades before Peter Weiss's vision of revolution as a "general copulation" in *Marat-Sade,* Witkacy explored in his novels and plays the intoxication with violence and power and their affinity with

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sex. He foresaw the old despotism being replaced by a new one that would be even more terrible. Like other prophets of the "decline of the West," Witkacy considered Europe a spiritual vacuum, unable to defend itself against the rising totalitarian ideologies. He was especially aware of the fragility of Poland, positioned between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

Witkacy himself was not spared catastrophe. After Hitler's march into Poland, he offered himself for military service but was rejected because of age (he was fifty-four). He fled Warsaw, directing himself, like many other refugees, to the East. By the middle of September he arrived near the Russian border. When, on September 17, in accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Red Army crossed over into Poland to annex its eastern territory, Witkacy committed suicide.

In its presentation of manuscripts, photographs, and letters, the exhibition does justice to Witkacy's overpowering dynamism and multiple talents. As a philosopher, he wrote essays about the dualism—objective and subjective—of the human identity. Interested in anthropology, he participated, as draftsman and photographer, in Bronislaw Malinowski's scientific expedition to Australia. As an aesthetician, he elaborated a theory of the predominance of form in art—this in 1918. And as a playwright, he brilliantly depicted the cruel and absurd worlds we associate with the plays of Ionesco and Beckett, written over a decade later than Witkacy's. Indeed, many consider Witkacy's writing for the stage to be his greatest achievement.

As a painter, Witkacy was an expressionist largely indebted to Art Nouveau. His strange compositions, executed in oil in strong, contrasting colors, are characterized by convulsive movement. They show heterogeneous creatures—half human, half animal—dancing in the air, pursuing one another and combining with plants and landscapes: heads grow out of plants, arms and legs emerge from clouds; mountains become snakes. Everything pulsates ambiguously and smells of sex. There is a hallucinatory quality to his pictures as well; their spontaneous wildness occasionally surpasses that of the German and French expressionists of his time.

Perhaps Witkacy's best paintings are his consciously "commercial" portraits of friends and acquaintances. He drew them with pastels on sheets of darkish paper and signed them not only with name and date but also with a listing of the narcotics he had taken while working on each portrait. Usually the "drugs" consisted of black coffee, vodka, beer, cigarettes, and aspirin—although occasionally they included hashish and cocaine. On some drawings he lists what he ate during the "creation." For instance: "one sandwich, one egg in mayonnaise plus caviar, two franks, one piece of cake, one fruit, one doughnut, ice cream." After each item is the price he paid for it.

Even more interesting and avant-garde than Witkacy's paintings are his photographs—also displayed in the Paris exhibition. At the beginning, he documented locomotives; later, landscapes, especially the Tatra mountains, and people. The multiple portraits of his father and himself show his fascination with mirrors. More important, they signify his complete break with traditional portrait photography. Indeed, some of his photographs seem to date not from the first decade of the century but from the Sixties and Seventies, when it became fashionable for photographers to produce long series of pictures of the same person in slightly altered positions.

The second part of the historical section of *Présences Polonaises* is dedicated to Constructivism, with a special emphasis on the achievements of Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Katarzyna Kobro, and Henryk Stazewski. Strzeminski was born in Minsk in 1893. He studied at the Academy of Engineering in St. Petersburg and participated in the First World War as an officer in the Tsarist Army. He was seriously wounded in the battle of Novogrod in 1916, losing an arm and a leg. At a Moscow hospital he met the sculptor

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Katarzyna Kobro, whom he married. After the October Revolution, they studied and worked in Moscow, later joining an artists' group in Vitebsk, where they collaborated with Malevich. In the early Twenties, however, there was a crackdown on artistic activity in the Soviet Union: exhibitions were canceled, people lost their posts, and many artists emigrated. Strzeminski left for Poland in 1922 and Kobro followed soon after.

The arrival of these two artists was an enormous gain for Polish art. They were not only talented artists but also theoreticians and activists who helped to organize Constructivism in their new country. Strzeminski developed his own theory of painting, which he called "unism"—from the "unity of forms on the surface of a canvas." His idea was to eliminate from painting not only subject matter but also perspective, reducing a painting to a colorfield slightly structured by rhythmic lines, dots, and other simple patterns engraved into a thickly applied paint.

A series of his "Architectural Compositions" (1929-1930) in the Paris exhibition consists of paintings exploring subtle variations of color and form; simple geometrical shapes are harmonized with each other in two or three colors. Strzeminski was interested in the painterly qualities of his art, in the shades and textures of color as well as in abstract construction. His art can be placed between the severe geometry of Malevich and the more decorative tendencies of other nonfigurative painters of the time.

After the Second World War Strzeminski was appointed professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz. Unlike many other Polish painters, he refused to change over to Socialist Realism and therefore in 1950 he was thrown out of his job. Two years later he died, in isolation and poverty (a fact mentioned neither in the exhibition's catalogue nor in any Polish encyclopedia). His writings were published only in 1957. One important part of his legacy is the collection of avant-garde art he helped to assemble in the early Thirties. It is now in Lodz, where it comprises one of the best contemporary art

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museums in Eastern Europe. Some of the highlights of the collection—paintings by Jean Arp, Theo van Doesburg, Louis Marcoussis, and Fernand Léger—are in the Paris exhibition.

Katarzyna Kobro had a greater affinity to Russian Constructivism than her husband and in many ways was an artist of greater power. Her sculptures—made of metal, painted in basic colors, and shaped into forceful rhythmic compositions—are well represented in the Paris show.

Unlike Strzeminski and Kobro, whose artistic origins were Russian, Henryk Stazewski was oriented toward the West. When he finished his studies at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw in 1920, he went to Paris. He met Mondrian and van Doesburg and was influenced by the Dutch version of Constructivism. He participated in the "Machine Age" exhibition organized in New York in 1927 and in the "Salon d'Automne" exhibition in Paris in 1928. He worked with Seuphor and Arp and often collaborated with Strzeminski and Kobro. During the Second World War many of his paintings were destroyed. He was absent from the art scene during the Stalinist days, returning only in 1955 with an exhibition of abstract paintings and white reliefs. Today he lives in Warsaw, still working in the Constructivist tradition, the grand master of Polish art.

Polish Constructivism was not confined to painting and sculpture, of course. The Constructivists were active in architecture, industrial design, poster art, illustration, publishing, photography, and film, and their varied work is much on display in *Présences Polonaises.* Especially noteworthy is the work of several artists who emigrated from Poland during the war, never to return: for example, the painter Henryk Berlewi and Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, who in the Thirties created avant-garde films and photomontages.

At the periphery of the circle described by Witkacy and the constructivists stands the lonely figure of the writer and draftsman Bruno Schulz, the third and last subject of the historical section of the Paris exhibition. Schulz's novels and stories remind one of the dense and threatening universe of Kafka, whom he translated into Polish. But Schulz's stories do not show the strictly ordered sensibility of German Jewry and talmudic rationalism but the fantastic and mystical mindset of the Hassidim and the *Zohar* in a Galician shtetl.

Schulz was born in 1892 in Drohobycz, the son of a Jewish textile merchant. He studied architecture in Lwow and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In 1924 he was appointed professor of drawing at the secondary school in Drohobycz, his talent for drawing being as prodigious as his talent for writing. But the atmosphere of this provincial town was extraordinarily depressing to him. With the publication of his collection of stories in 1934, he became known to the larger world, and in 1938 he finally received a small stipend to travel. He spent two weeks in Paris, where he tried in vain to find a gallery for his drawings.

The small drawings and engravings in the Paris exhibition reflect Schulz's sexual repression and masochism. In their subject matter they resemble Aubrey Beardsley's work. Schulz liked to draw dwarfish men creeping at the feet of overwhelmingly large female beauties. Taking into account the circumstances of his life—he never married and he lived in his family's household—Schulz's sexual experience was probably limited. In her memoirs, Zofia Nalkowska, the queen of Polish prewar literature and a beautiful woman with a predilection for enormous hats, alludes to an affair they had "on the edge of a sofa." It lasted only one night.

Under the Soviet occupation, Schulz continued to work at school and library. When Germany declared war on the Soviet Union and the Nazis took Drohobycz, he moved to the municipal archives. In November 1942 an agent of the Gestapo killed him in the street, not far from his house in the ghetto.

If the historical section of *Présences Polonaises* is excellent, the second section, de-

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voted to "Contemporaries," is problematic. Some older artists, like Tadeusz Kantor and his wife Maria Stangret, are too much present, while other artists are omitted. The generation born after World War II is as good as absent. The lively and diverse art world of the young Polish artists is represented in Paris by only three men—unfortunately not the doubles of Witkacy, Strzeminski, and Schulz but rather their opposites, at least as far as originality and vitality are concerned. Two of them, Wojciech Bruszewski (b. 1947) and Janusz Polom (b. 1950), belong to a group of experimental film directors interested in the analysis of image and sound. The third, Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943), a conceptual artist, has been living abroad since 1975, first in the United States and now in Canada. Their presence can be perhaps best explained by their concern with purely formal questions and their detachment from the turbulent political situation of their native country. At best these three men stand for the continuation of the most abstract Constructivist approach, although most of the original Constructivists were concerned with society's reality as much as with art. In the historical section of the Paris exhibition a Constructivist poster by Teresa Zarnower reads: "Amnesty for Political Prisoners" (1926); at that time, the majority of those prisoners were Communists. Today, the Communists run the prisons themselves. The protest posters designed in recent years are of course not in the exhibition. Nor is there a sign of the realistic figurative painting that has been flourishing in Poland, like everywhere else, in the past twenty years.

A review of the contemporary section inevitably leads one to think about all that is absent. In 1977, the artists' group "O Poprawe" (For Betterment) organized an exhibition of work by young Polish painters. It toured the French provinces and at one point was supposed to appear at the Centre Pompidou. It never did, and Paris missed its chance to see the paintings of several Polish realists, Edward Dwurnik (b. 1943) being the most important among them. Oscillating between art *brut,* folk art, and a very Polish brand of Pop Art, Dwurnik is perhaps the only true "socialist realist." He has been documenting since the early Sixties all aspects of private and public life in a socialist country: dull pages of newspapers; window displays showing one product stacked into a dusty pyramid; butcher's shops filled not with meat but with angry human flesh; tiny, crammed apartments; workers playing cards and drinking vodka in the factory during working hours; arrogant bureaucrats ruling over their plump secretaries and mountains of paper; elegant prostitutes waiting for clients in the international hotels; policemen assaulting citizens.

The present Polish reality has been documented on a more intimate level too. The paintings of Lukasz Korolkiewicz (b. 1948) and Andrzej Bielawski (b. 1949), for example, explore sexual taboos and expose forces at work behind the scenes. Because they reflect the reality of private lives, they have sometimes been censored for being "obscene." Korolkiewicz is perhaps the first Polish artist to have painted men dressed as women, and men in love with each other—no small achievement in a Catholic Communist country. Even more obsessed with the hypocrisy of conventional mores are some of the performance artists and actionists, the feminist Ewa Partum (b. 1946) and the conceptualist Natalia LL., to name but two.

Of course, no one exhibition can ever do justice to everybody. But to omit nearly all the younger generation is to silence the present. The organizers of *Présences Polonaises* must have themselves felt the emptiness of the contemporary section. Thus, they filled it with photographs of Polish writers, poets, and composers, with copies of their books and snapshots of theater performances and concerts. But writers like Gombrowicz, Herbert, Milosz, Brandys, Andrzejewski, Konwicki, and Mrozek do not need the Beaubourg show's celebrity; they need to be published in their own country. The complete writings of Witold Gombrowicz are available only in the émigré edition

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of Kultura, a Paris-based publisher; only a small part of Czeslaw Milosz's poems and essays have appeared in Poland; Jerzy Andrzejewski circulated his last novel in *samizdat*; all of Tadeusz Konwicki's recent novels were smuggled out of the country and published abroad; Kazimierz Brandys publishes now abroad. All these people have been heavily attacked in the last few months by the Party press and they must be surprised by their presence in *Présences Polonaises*. But nobody needs an author's consent to exhibit his books and photographs.

The contemporary section of the Paris exhibition reverses a simple truth. It omits what could be seen and presents what should be read. The present Polish literature is absent in Poland's bookstores, the present Polish art is absent both in the Paris show and in its own country. Since the introduction of martial law, official shows have been boycotted; many smaller galleries remain closed. The artists' union has been dissolved. Disappointed and bitter, young artists are caught between the unwillingness to compromise and the threat of being pushed underground. Many of them have been trying to find an alternative to the state-supported culture by exhibiting in churches and performing in private homes. But this can continue only for a while. It remains to be seen if there is any near future for the present Polish art, so ominously absent in *Présences Polonaises*.

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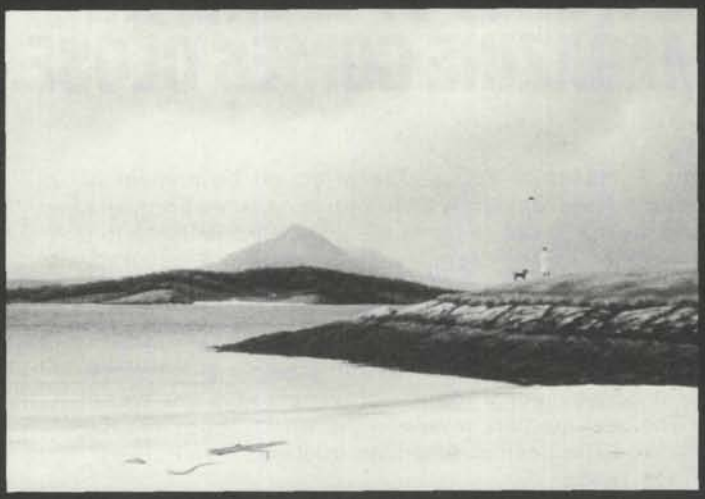

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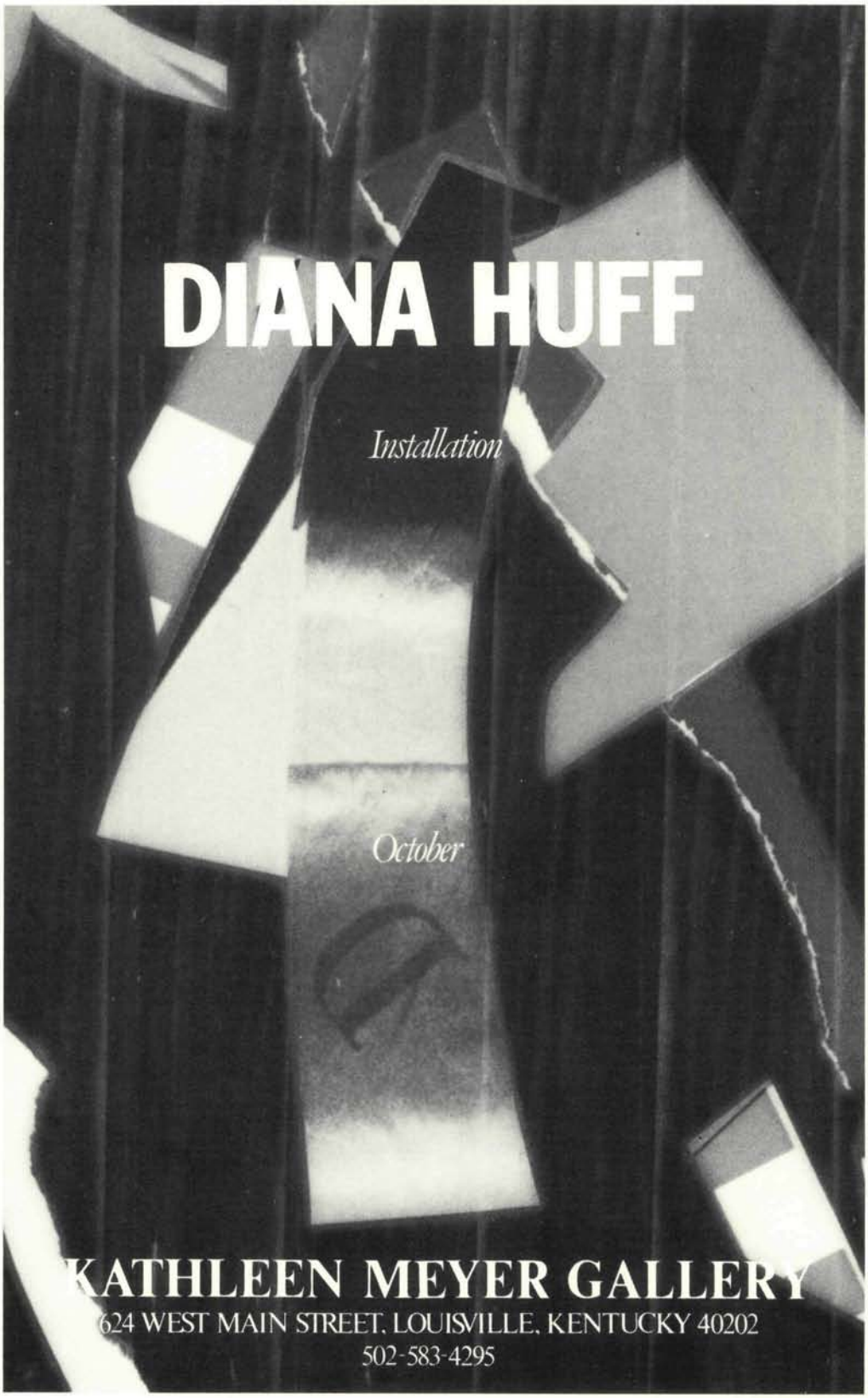

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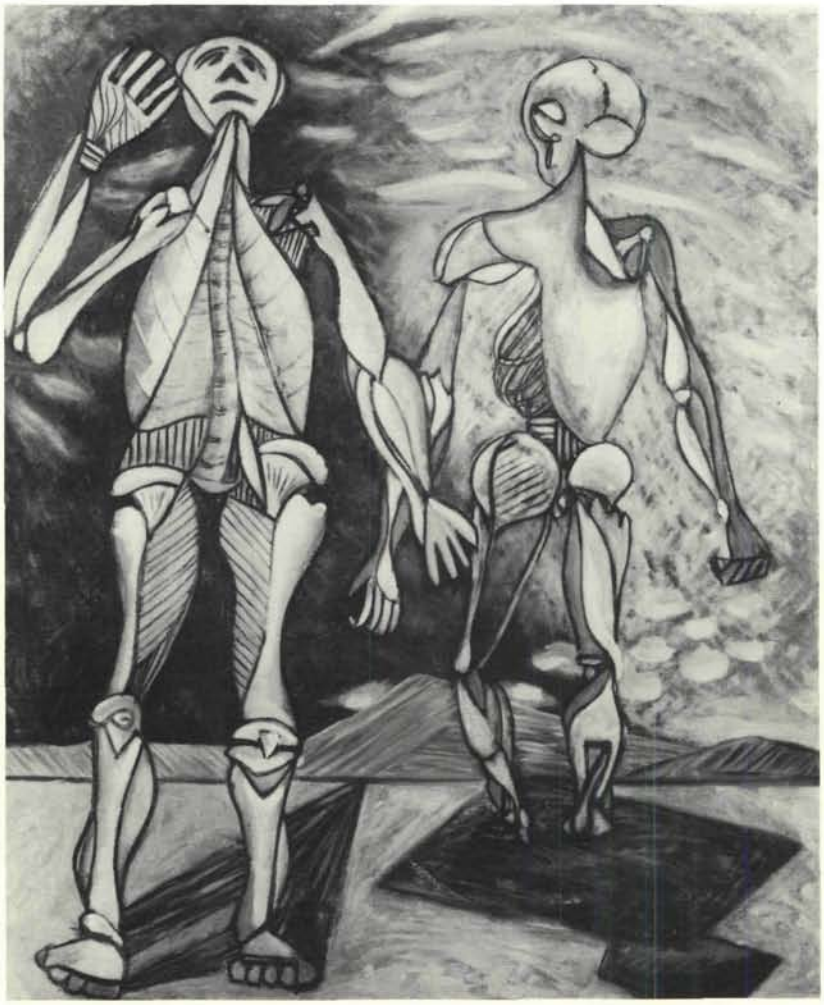

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